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AN AUSTRALIAN HEROINE.

AN
AUSTRALIAN HEROINE.

BY
R. MURRAY PRIOR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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AN AUSTRALIAN HEROINE.

CHAPTER I.

ESTHER.

ESTHER was perched upon a bare black rock, which bristled out from the side of a cliff, worn into crannies and furrows by the incessant dash of the ocean. A tangle of seaweed lay all round her, and her feet dangled over a still pool, left by the retreating waves as they swashed over a sunken reef, a few paces off. The sea gurgled backwards and forwards with a cradle-like motion, and played upon the shingle, casting up shreds of sponge and coarse marine plants, sometimes stranding them high and dry among the decaying jellyfish and dead cuttle-shells, and sometimes carrying them back again, as if in sport.

Esther was a slip of a girl, slender as a tropical reed, badly dressed in an ill-fitting cotton gown,

with a coarse straw hat in her hand, and rough leather shoes upon her well-formed feet. Her clothing was that of an ill-cared-for child of the people: her hands, though small, were tanned by exposure and hardened by labour, but her face, high-bred in every line, suggested pleasing possibilities of future beauty. It was pale and oval, with a tremulous, sensitive mouth and deep, dreamy eyes—in colour a combination of violet and grey, and with that wistful, half-conscious look which is rarely seen except in the eyes of a precocious child who the gossips say “is not long for this world.” Her features were small and regular, her neck slender, and her hair dark, with a natural tendency to crisp waves upon the brow and the nape of the neck.

The black, forbidding cliff formed a sombre background to the girl's figure. It was a bleak rock, which bound the extremity of a narrow cape, and upon its summit was a red lighthouse, visible at sea for miles off. A narrow strip of sand and shingle curved round the base of the cliff, but from where Esther sat there was nothing to be seen but the wild, restless Pacific, stretching out towards the horizon.

Esther loved the sea, for it was almost the only companion she had. A nearly uninhabited island, swept by southern hurricanes and

unreclaimed by civilisation, was all the world she knew ; but beyond—to the east—where the horizon-line melted into that of ocean, there was another, a misty, mythic region, peopled by the wandering fancies that had assumed shape in her imagination, and dwelt out there in a charmed life, to which she could at will transport herself. Her eyes were fixed seaward now, and her lips were moving silently. In her lap lay a tattered book, only a few pages of printed matter ; but they contained the story of Hans Andersen's Sea-maid, and Esther had read and re-read them till she knew them almost by heart. Surely upon such a summer's morning as this the little mermaid might have swum to the shore and gazed wistfully at the palace of the beautiful prince ; but there was no palace on the island, or prince either for that matter, and Esther was to the full as ignorant and as yearning as the poor pathetic sea-maid. All the creatures of Esther's imagination were wistful and longing-eyed, regarding from afar a paradise of action and romance, from moving in which the very conditions of their being withheld them.

It was very dull sitting there, and she was only a child who wanted amusement like all other children, even when they have attained the advanced age of sixteen. A thought suddenly

struck Esther ; she stooped and unlaced her leather shoes and let her brown, naked feet slip into the shallow basin left by the sea below them. Beside the pool there was a tiny plateau of silvery sand, walled in by miniature rocks, and at one end a shelving daïs, which fancy could readily canopy with seaweed and mother-of-pearl, and transform into a throne for marine monarchy. This fairy *salon* might be the dancing-hall of the sea-princesses. From his raised seat the old king might look down upon their revels and applaud when he was pleased, and yonder was the window whence the seven mermaidens were wont to glance longingly up through the blue sea to the world of ships and of men which was so tantalisingly near, and yet so difficult of attainment.

Esther collected the tiny shimmering shells that strewed the beach, and adorned with them the floor of the Princesses' hall, tapestrying the walls with green and crimson seaweed and arranging couches of inverted periwinkles and mussel-shells. It may seem a babyish employment for a girl of sixteen, but Esther was a solitary, uneducated creature, and had no mental resources for the employment of her time.

The sun, for it was early morning, rose higher and higher into the cloudless sky, and cast down

myriads of twinkling diamonds into the sea. Esther began to feel hungry. Taking from her pocket a lump of coarse home-made bread, she munched it abstractedly as she proceeded with her fascinating child's play ; so absorbed was she that she did not hear a step that crunched upon the shingle behind her.

"Hey, Esther !" cried a man's rough voice, "what are you after now ?"

The girl started and turned. A short, weather-beaten sailor, in a loose dark-blue jersey and baggy trousers, with a square brown face and shaggily fringed deep-set eyes, looked at her in a kind of wondering disapproval.

"Nothing, Joe," replied Esther ; "I'm only playing."

"Well, I'm darned ! What has a great gell like you to do with such playing nonsense and mooning ways ? What are you building there ? A doll's house, belike, which the sea'll sweep away next tide. You should be above such goings on : a young woman as 'ull be seventeen year old her next birthday ! For shame, Miss Esther ! Now if you were to set yourself to your sewing, or to redd up the house a bit, it 'ud be a deal better for you."

"I have redd up the house, Joe," said Esther, her silvery tones contrasting with the sailor's

coarse intonation ; “ and this does no harm, you know. I’ve got no books that I care about, and playing stories is next best to reading them. I got up early this morning and did everything before I left the hut, and I was going back presently to see if father had come in, and if he wanted any breakfast.”

“ Hagart has been drinking hard again,” said Joe. “ I heard him ranting about the beach last night.”

Esther nodded mournfully. “ The grog is almost out, Joe.”

“ The shakes ’ull be on him agen afore long,” remarked Joe, with the air of one familiarised to the various stages of drunkenness. “ He were singing out to his dead missus last night, and when I hears that, I says to Nancy, ‘ It’s time to look after Miss Esther ! ’ ”

“ You have been a good friend to me, Joe. I don’t know how I should get on if it were not for you.”

“ I promised your mother afore she died that I’d see as Hagart did not harm you,” said Joe, “ and I’m not one as makes a promise and forgets to keep it.”

“ My poor mother,” murmured Esther, her sensitive lip quivering.

“ Don’t take on,” said Joe ; “ it’s a mercy that she is dead. A drunken master is worse for

the wife than for the children—leastways, there's a chance for the one of getting rid of him, and there ain't none for the other. A wife is bound by the Bible to cleave to her husband as long as they both shall live. It has always puzzled me," added Joe reflectively, "whether the Almighty took drink into consideration when He laid them orders upon His servants." This was a moral problem beyond Esther's powers of solution. "I've noticed," continued Joe—"and I've seen a many of them in Australia—that it's always them as have been gentlefolks that knock under to drink the worst. I'm not holding out, Esther, that I hain't gone on a spree myself, and come home a darned sight heavier in the head and lighter in the breeches pockets than when I set out; but there was an end to it for that time, at any rate. But with Hagart it's a being dry for ever—a selling of one's stomach entire to the devil. There ain't no wild beasts in Australia, as there are in Indy or Ameriky; but to be always dry inside, and craving a drop, is worse to my mind than being eaten outright by a rampaging beast or a venomous reptile. It's since he has been on the island, Esther, that your father has took to drink. I'd give a sight to know what brought him here."

Esther shook her head. "I can't remember, Joe, where we lived before we came here."

"Lagged, may be," said Joe thoughtfully. "No, you wouldn't recollect. You were a little toddlekins of six when your father came to the island. I remember your mother carrying you in her arms and crying because there was no milk for you. We bought the goats soon after that, and I fetched 'em all the way from Frazer-ville in the long boat. Your mother took kindly to me after that job. She was a beautiful creature, Miss Esther,—a lady to the sole of her foot. I've seen such in the old country. They mostly drove in carriages and lived in grand houses, and wore silks and velvets. Your mother was of that sort, but proud—Lord, she was proud! and melancholy—there was scarcely ever a smile upon her face. But I kep' my distance from her. I was always one to know a lady when I seed her, and I told Nancy she warn't to be too familiar, and by and by we got to be friends after a fashion. If she wanted a bit of wood cut she'd come to me, or a shelf put up. 'Joe,' she'd say, 'I know you're a good carpenter.' It was I made the frames for them pictures in the hut—queer drawin's, I thought them,—and the squatters' chairs in the verandah."

Joe paused in his reminiscences. "Oh, go on," cried Esther; "you don't know how I love to hear of my mother. Tell me more, Joe; for sometimes," she added, her voice lowering to a whisper, "I feel that she is near me. It's at night sometimes, in the dark, when father has got his fits on, or when I'm walking alone by the sea, or sitting beside her grave."

"That's an uncanny notion, Miss Esther," said Joe; "it's of a piece with your mooning ways, and it ain't healthy for a gell like you to be thinking of such things. You should be working at your sampler or redding up the house, as I said afore, instead of wandering about and making play with your bits of seaweed and shells like any daft creature. I'm not for saying," added Joe with an air of deep wisdom, "that there ain't no truth in sperrits. There's many things I've seen in my life as 'ud make me unwilling to deny them; but there's no good in over-much dwelling upon the thought of them that's dead. Sometimes, may be, as is but nat'ral, they like to have a look at the old places; and who's to say them nay?—for sperrits is not bound by or'nary rules of coming and going. There was the admiral, my old master—you've heerd me talk of him, perhaps?"

"Yes," said Esther, deeply interested; "but

go on, Joe ; if it's about his coming back, tell me again."

"I served him, Miss Esther, afore I ever thought of coming out to Australia. I was a lad then, but he was mortal fond of me, and took me into his domestic service. I was odd-job man about the place, and used to sleep in his room, when he got that infirm that he could not wait upon himself. I was beside him when he died, going off in his sleep as quiet as a child. Often I've thought that he wanted perhaps to say good-bye to me ; for oftentimes after he was dead and I was working in the garden, or doing a bit of carpentering in the shed, I'd hear his step behind me, shuffling his feet just as he used. 'Joe,' says he, 'we'll take a little turn.' 'All right, Admiral,' I answers, not a bit skeered, and he leans upon my arm ; but I sees nothing, and we walks round by the vegetable garden. 'Joe,' says he, 'them seeds won't come up,' and sure enough they never do ; or 'Joe,' he says, 'them roses won't blow,' and as certain as I stand here there wouldn't be a bloom upon the bushes. That was how it was, Miss Esther, and if I put out my hand to touch him, he was gone. Who's to say after that as there ain't no sperrits ?"

Joe had been talking on abstractedly with his eyes fixed upon the sea-line, and Esther was

listening, her breath coming and going in deep inspirations, and a rapt, dreamy expression upon her face which imparted to it a spiritualised beauty. Joe paused. He suddenly wrinkled up his brows and drew his hand to his forehead, peering eagerly out from beneath it. "I see some smoke upon the horizon," he said; "maybe it's a steamer that'll need to be signalled. You had better go back to the hut, Esther, and be in hearing to work the telegraph wires, for I'm thinking the pilot won't be up to much to-day. I must go and see about the old boat that's had her side stove in."

Esther cast a regretful look at the fairy house she had been building, and then, after putting on her stockings and shoes, turned round the cliff and ascended it by a steep path which led, zigzag-fashion, up to its summit.

CHAPTER II.

THE PILOT STATION.

MUNDUOLAN ISLAND is a long strip of land some forty miles in length, and varying from seven to fourteen in breadth, lying parallel with the north-eastern coast of Australia. Its northern extremity forms a bluff narrow cape upon which stands a lighthouse and a pilot and telegraph-station; the business of the officials being to guide ships past the great barrier reef and to signal and report vessels bound northward, and such small coasting steamers as find their way up the Frazer river to the town of Frazerville.

The Frazer river discharges itself into the bay which is commanded by the Mundoolan Island lighthouse. Frazerville was intended by its projectors to be the capital of Northern Australia, but from various causes has disappointed the expectations of its well-wishers, and is rather in a state of decadence than of development.

Mundoolan Island is divided from the mainland by a strait called the Narrows, four miles wide or thereabouts at its northern and southern ends, and differing at the middle, according to tidal changes, from two miles to less than a mile. At this narrowest portion the owners of Bully Wallah are able twice in the month, at full and new moon, to swim their cattle across to the mainland.

At the opening of this story the greatest part of the island was merged in a large cattle station called Bully Wallah, upon which grazed the herds of Andrew Overstone, Esq., and the remainder, to be topographically exact, about six thousand acres, comprised the pilot station above mentioned, and an extensive tract of land formerly appropriated by the government for a mission-station for the conversion of aboriginals, but never used for that purpose.

The country, except where it fringes upon the sea, is extremely fertile and well wooded and watered, undulating in sloping hills and grassy plains, while, like the Isle of Calypso, perpetual spring seems to reign in its borders, and sea-breezes temper the otherwise tropical heat; yet at that time, except the huts at the pilot station and the owner's residence at Bully Wallah, there was not a habitation upon it.

It may appear strange that so inviting a territory should be so thinly populated; but land is illimitable in Australia, and the island did not afford those facilities for transit and transport that are desirable for the settler.

Mr. Overstone's predecessor at Bully Wallah had been, fourteen years previously, the first pioneer of civilisation upon this northern shore. He had (by the terror of his firearms) driven the aborigines on to the mainland, had built the head station, and had been an enthusiastic assistant in the formation of Frazerville. But both the island and the town had disappointed his hopes. Plagues of pleuro-pneumonia had decimated his herds. Frazerville had sunk by the discovery of gold-fields a little higher north, and the enterprising explorer had been glad to sell his station at a low price to Mr. Overstone. In his time it had been thought advisable to build a lighthouse and to establish a signal station at the cape, and upon its completion the pilot Hagart, his wife and daughter, a child of six, and four sailors, had first taken up their abode upon Mundoolan Island.

Though many ships and steamers passed the pilot station, it was rare indeed for one to put in there, and the cape was almost as lonely as a reef in the midst of the Pacific.

The headland stretched out in a narrow tongue into the sea, and before the erection of the lighthouse had evidently been a point of danger ; for the ribs of wrecked vessels lay embedded in the sand and wedged in between the rocks, and it could be plainly seen that the earliest and rudest of the huts, built by a missionary who had lost his life in trying to convert the blacks, had been constructed of the planks that had formerly clothed these skeletons.

A flock of goats browsed upon the cliff. In times of extremity, when meat was scarce, the kids' flesh furnished food for the pilots and the dams provided milk for their slender households. The herd found but scant subsistence, for herbage was not plentiful upon the cape. Stunted grass, creeping marine plants and rock lichen, and round the well-manured goat yard a miniature forest of fat-hen, as it is vulgarly termed—that was all. A few gaunt cocoa-palms, the offspring of nuts washed ashore by the gales, grew low down upon the beach, and here and there a clump of bread-fruit trees, whose roots, stretching out like the spikes of an inverted umbrella, caught hold of the slender stratum of soil and resisted the keen winds from the south-east. Neither flowers nor vegetables would grow in that barren spot, and the hardy creeper which with infinite care Esther had

succeeded in training over the verandah of the pilot's cottage, was often torn down by the violence of the tempests.

Anything more desolate can scarcely be imagined, and yet it was a picturesque desolation, to which the eye never grew accustomed, and compared with which, the grassy slopes and spreading foliage of the country behind seemed tame and monotonous. Sometimes the lighthouse stood out against a background of stone grey fluctuating with emerald green, while through little rifts overhead the sun seemed to mock at an angry sea. Sometimes the wind struggled, as it were, to tear up the huts from their foundations, and vented its futility on the waves, which it lashed into a fury equal to the overwhelming of the lighthouse itself. Sometimes the sun baked every inch of the dry soil till it resembled the cracked surface of a lava field, and at others just warmed it in a genial way, dancing lightly over blue waves and distant sails ; and occasionally rain blended sea and sky, and turned both into the mistiness of smoke ; so, although the cape was wild and dreary, it was never for long the same.

There were not more than half-a-dozen huts in the settlement ; of these the chief pilot's dwelling was the most pretentious. It was built of slab

and had a shingled roof, whereas the rest were covered with bark, and a verandah all round it ; but it consisted only of four rooms, a scullery, and an abutting lean-to, which served as telegraph office.

It was to this cottage that Esther returned after her interview with Joe upon the beach. She stepped on to the verandah with an air of apprehension, as though she knew not what violence might await her, and looked timidly into the sitting-room, before she ventured to cross the threshold. There was no trace of her father's presence, and with an air of relief she entered, laid down her hat and began to spread the cloth for the pilot's breakfast should he require it ; but when brandy flowed freely, the consumption of solid food diminished in proportion. She had not seen her father since the previous evening, when he had shut himself up for a booze, and then had wandered forth in the night for a ramble along the sea-shore or in the bush, from which he had not returned.

Esther placed bread and meat upon the table, and went into the little back kitchen, where she replenished the fire and saw that the kettle was on the boil. Then she re-entered the sitting-room, and her work done, sat down and began to dream. Poor Esther ! in all the wanderings of

her spirit, her face never lost its anxious deprecatory expression, the look of a child to whom the happiness of well-cared-for youth is unknown, and who has had no education save that of hardship to fit it for womanhood.

The room in which Esther sat was, save for the presence of several wild cat and kangaroo skins, carpetless. The walls were plainly lined with canvas, and the windows were guiltless of glass. Upon stormy days, it was a choice between closing the shutters and sitting in darkness, or of being at the mercy of the wind. A few books were arranged upon hanging shelves over the mantelpiece, but they were not of a nature to attract a girl of Esther's tendencies, whose reading had as yet been confined to the fairy tales which she borrowed from the little Overstones, or such stray novels as found their way to the pilot station. Upon a rudely fashioned side-board stood a bowl of ferns and wild flowers gathered in a scrub some distance off. There was also a roughly carpentered couch, and two or three squatters' chairs in canvas and pine-wood were ranged by the fireplace. The only remarkable objects in the room were two unglazed crayon drawings which hung upon the wall. These were curious, both from the subjects and their mode of execution. They appeared to be

studies in black and white for painting in oil, and were full of odd contrasts of light and shade, and though dashed off carelessly, had an intensity of conception which was almost genius.

One represented the semi-nude figure of a drowned woman, floating with face upturned in a still pool surrounded by high rocks, which seemed almost to shut out the light of day. A gleam of sunshine piercing through lurid clouds, illuminated the face of the dead woman, and disclosed at its source the same features glorified into a supernal beauty. Upon the other side of the picture, a Cain-like figure, crouching against a rock, looked down with despairing, remorseful eyes upon his victim.

The second was equally sensational in character. A man stood dismayed and trembling, in a night of gloomy darkness, the space immediately surrounding him peopled by shapes of indescribable loathsomeness, of which the outlines were indistinctly revealed by the ghastly light of a torch held in his hand. He appeared to have entered a region of horrors, and to be shrinking appalled from the noxious creatures with which it abounded. The shadowy form of a woman, with an angel's face like that in the picture already described, stretched forth a restraining hand, and sought to draw him back,

while he, with eyes straining into the darkness beyond, seemed unconscious of the ineffectual grasp.

Esther was looking at these pictures in a dreamy way. As a child she had puzzled over them, and had now but a vague recollection of their composition. They had been drawn about two years after the pilot's arrival at Mundoolan Island, before drink had completely enslaved him, and when there had been days of remorse and of forced abstinence. He seldom now touched chalk or drawing-board. Esther knew that the woman's face was that of her dead mother, and she understood now what the subjects were vaguely intended to convey, and wondered at her father's insensibility in allowing them to remain upon the walls. Perhaps he was too embroiled to care, for there they had hung as long as she could remember, and had been the inspiring source of many an imaginary picture of her own. The scenes which passed before her mind's eye were realistic enough. She had longed for a mode of expression, and had often taken up pen or pencil in the vain endeavour to embody her conceptions, but she lacked executive power, and had found it sweeter to dream waking, and to watch the groups flitting by without making an effort to retain them, than to struggle after

a permanent acquisition which must inevitably fall short of the ideal. While she was thinking vaguely and not unpleasantly, her father's shambling, uncertain footstep struck the verandah, and, as his figure darkened the doorway, Esther's face changed from its expression of abstraction to one of apprehension. The tide had evidently crept in upon him and had warned him to rise, for his clothes were wet and stained with sand and sea-slime. Hagart's features were fine, though his eyes were bleared and his lips coarse. His shirt was open at the breast, his hair and beard were dishevelled, and his hand trembled as he clutched at the table to steady himself. His look was wild and uneasy, and his face bloated; yet in spite of outward degradation, he had in his bearing the traces of having fallen from a higher station, and after looking at him, it was impossible to feel surprise that his daughter's appearance gave evidence of more innate refinement than her position warranted. Here was another of those tragedies only too common in Australia, that refuge for improvidence and vice.

Joe Bride declared his conviction that Hagart was "not one of our sort," and that if he could only keep clear of drink, he might sit down to dinner with the Governor himself and not feel ashamed; but Hagart sober was a rare

phenomenon. He nipped more or less all day and night, carrying his flask in his breast, taking sly pulls whenever the insatiate demon Thirst got the better of him. He spent almost all his salary in grog, contriving to have it brought down from Frazerville in the cutters and small steamers, that passed close to the pilot station. Sometimes accident limited the supply, and then he had fits of *delirium tremens* more or less violent, and more or less dangerous to his daughter. Joe Bride upon these occasions watched over Esther with fatherly care, and when he saw an outbreak imminent, would send a sailor on foot to Bully Wallah, with a letter imploring Mr. Overstone to take her away till Hagart came round again. It was he who advised Esther to secure her door at night, and had manufactured a rough but efficacious bolt for that purpose. The girl had now almost attained to the courage of persons who carry their lives in their hands. She was fully aware of the danger to be apprehended from knives and razors when handled by an inebriate, and knew by heart the phases of delirium, and the juncture when precaution became necessary.

“You are idling as usual,” said the pilot, and his intonation, though thickened by intemperance, harmonised with the suspicion of his antecedents.

“ I have done my work, father,” replied Esther. “ I did not know when you would want breakfast. There is some cold kid, and I can make your tea in a minute.”

“ Get me the meat and bread ! Don’t you see that I am wet through ? I’ll have something stronger than tea to drink.” He went into the inner room, and fumbled about for a few moments, then returned angrily. “ Where have you put the brandy ? Go and find it this instant.”

“ It is in the cupboard, father. The bottle was very nearly empty, and I thought that as there was only a little more—”

“ Who asked you to think ? ” exclaimed Hagart angrily. “ Have I not forbidden you ever to touch the brandy ? Leave it where I place it. Do you hear ? ”

Esther rose, and tremblingly produced the bottle from a cupboard against the wall.

“ A cup—quick ! ” cried Hagart.

She obeyed, and he filled the vessel nearly half full, and drank the spirit neat, uttering with some satisfaction the gurgling sound which always followed an undiluted draught, and which Esther had come to regard with ineffable disgust. A woman who is bound to live with a drunkard, soon learns to know and to loathe each successive phase of intemperance. The geniality which

comes after a glass is, to her, scarcely less odious than the gloom and irritability which precede it; she knows so well that each sign of affection or penitence, is mere drunken sensibility or maudlin drivel; and Esther already felt keenly the hopelessness of endeavouring to influence a nature, whose inmost feelings demanded the stimulation of brandy.

The bottle was empty, and Hagart called for another, which she supplied. He took his flask from his breast, and filled it, with shaking hands, giving vent to an oath as some of the precious liquor was wasted. He poured out a little more and drank it, and then seated himself at the table. Esther placed the meat before him, and waited upon him while he ate; the brandy had driven away his nausea and he made a fair meal. Before he had finished, Joe Bride appeared at the door. Hagart vouchsafed a sullen nod.

"You hain't done breakfast yet," said Bride. "Bestir yourself, pilot, for you're wanted on the beach. That old boat takes a deal of tinkering."

"You are carpenter here," said Hagart; "I suppose that you can see after it."

"I believe it's your business to give orders to the men," retorted Joe. "There's a large steamer lying to, and signalling like fury."

"Have you made out what she is?"

“The *Gwalior* from Sydney. It puzzles me what she wants a pilot for; the captain knows the coast as well as I do.”

Hagart sent the captain to a warm place, and hastily swallowed his last mouthful of brandy.

“Have a nip, Joe.”

“I’m much obliged,” replied Joe, “but I takes my grog at night; I don’t hold with them appetisers before the day’s work is begun.”

“A man needs something to straighten him,” said Hagart, “when he has been wet through with sea-water.”

“The more fool he for going to sleep on the beach. Come, stir up, pilot, or you’ll get into a row. You had better smarten yourself a bit, while I shove the boat out.”

Joe went whistling off to the beach, and after a few hasty touches to his toilette, Hagart followed him.

In a few minutes the crew, Hagart steering, had pulled off to the steamer, which lay about four miles out to sea. The people on board had been watching through their glasses the approach of the pilot boat, and a young man leaning over the vessel’s side exclaimed in a laughing voice :

“Here is the boat, Captain. We need not detain you any longer. When Lydyiard has established his new colony, we’ll invite you on

shore and treat you to *bêche de mer* soup, which, as far as I can gather, is the only delicacy that Frazer's Bay produces."

"I am sure, gentlemen," said the Captain, who was fuming at the delay, "that if you consider the importance of fulfilling the mail contract in the specified time, you will forgive my anxiety to get rid of you."

"We quite understand," said a small deformed looking man of sixty or thereabouts, the projector of the colony to which the handsome youth had jestingly alluded. "Accept our thanks for having delayed your voyage so far as to put us on shore."

A rope was thrown, and the pilot boat made fast to the steamer's side, while the four rowers shipped their oars and waited for orders to climb the deck. "Stop where you are," shouted the Captain, "it's not a pilot that I want. Good morning, Hagart. Here are two gentlemen for Bully Wallah. I suppose you can put them up till they can hear from Mr. Overstone. Now look sharp with those portmanteaux."

The hospitality so curtly demanded, was conceded by Hagart in a sullen nod. The baggage was slung into the boat; the young man and his companion descended the companion ladder; the sailors plied their oars, and in a few

moments, with a splashing and groaning of her screw, the mail steamer had puffed up steam, and the pilot boat was being swiftly pulled towards the shore.

The young man threw a glance of anticipatory interest at his enforced host. It was not encouraging, and he turned towards the crew—brawny seamen, tanned to a reddish brown by exposure to tropical sun and salt-water, and indistinguishable from the ordinary sailor, save by the regulation costume of the pilot service.

“Good morning,” said Brand, for so he was called. “This is a longish pull for you.”

“Large steamers seldom come nearer shore,” replied Bride, “and as for the pull, it is all in the day’s work, and is nothing to grumble at on a fine morning like this.”

“This looks a dangerous coast,” continued Brand; “I daresay the sea is rough sometimes.”

“You’re right, sir, it *is* a ticklish business pulling five miles out on a dark night, with a south-easter blowing; but, Lord bless you! it’s all use; the worst of it is, that the rocks never seem to ha’ done growing.”

“I suppose the reefs are coral mostly?” said Brand. “Well, at any rate your profession is an exciting one, and that is more than I can say for mine—at present.”

“And what may yours be, sir?”

“I’m a soldier, but all the fighting I’ve had to do as yet, has been a sham battle on the parade-ground.”

“I’ve no doubt, sir,” said Bride with a twinkle in his eye, “that the petticoat brigade gives you some trouble.”

Brand, who was an extremely handsome young man, laughed with the pleasing consciousness that he was a favourite with women. He was about three-and-twenty, and till he came to Australia, had led the kind of life usual with well-born and tolerably well-off young men, who have expectations, and are popular in society. Brand almost preferred the Antipodes to the—in a social sense—wider field offered him in England, for he liked being king of his company, and he had no ambition with regard to career beyond that of enjoyment. Besides, although he was confident of heirship to a kinless, maternal uncle, that elderly relative was not tolerant of youthful vices and follies, and George Brand wisely preferred to amuse himself at a considerable distance, whence communication was infrequent and conveniently hazy, where horseflesh was cheaper, and feminine society—of the sort he most affected—as easy of possession.

The two seemed incongruous companions to

have chosen each other, but the fact that Mr. Lydyiard was a friend of his uncle's partly explained the connection. Lydyiard was deformed and partially paralysed, over fifty years of age, and so ugly, with his coarse grizzled locks, overhanging brows, and wizened up ungainly features, that no one could behold him without at first a feeling of repulsion ; but the impression wore off with familiarity, and left in its stead a recognition of talent and power. Lydyiard was, in fact, a man of some repute among a set of freethinkers and philosophic reformers, and though he could base his reputation upon no tangible work, had yet written sufficient, in a desultory manner, to confer notoriety.

He had seated himself in the bows, facing Hagart, who wielded the tiller, and from behind the rowers, could watch the pilot without attracting attention by his scrutiny. It was long and minute, and seemed to embrace the smallest peculiarity of feature and bearing. Surprise, doubt, conviction, rapidly succeeded each other upon his face. It was evident that the sight of Hagart had produced in his mind a strong feeling of interest ; it was almost like the shock of recognition, for he turned visibly pale, and with difficulty repressed the startled ejaculation

which rose to his lips. Hagart, in his turn, did not at first take any notice of the stranger, but kept his eyes fixed upon the distant shore. It was only when Brand addressed his friend, that the pilot started forward with a wild glance at the new-comer in the bows.

"This is a fine coast, Lydyiard, picturesque—but I should not say that it was good for much in the matter of cultivation."

"The country seems well wooded at the back," replied Lydyiard; "we see its baldest extremity."

"Who are you?" asked Hagart in an abrupt manner, without special reference to either of the strangers. "Are you friends of Mr. Overstone?"

"No," said Brand, "we have never seen the gentleman you have named."

"Are you free selectors then?"

"I don't think so," replied Brand, "at least I can answer that I am not."

"Then what the — is your business?" exclaimed the pilot with savage energy.

Brand looked surprised, and Bride gave a little whistle. "The boss has got more grog than he ought to have on board," he said in a low tone to Brand; "we call him 'Gentleman Hagart' when he's sober, but he ain't much like a gentleman now."

“Hold your — tongue,” roared Hagart; “who says I was a gentleman? I beg your pardon sir,” he added in a tone of sulky apology, “I have had a bad night and am out of sorts this morning.”

“I know,” said Brand sympathetically. “It’s bad liquor that does it—I am sure that my friend Mr. Lydyiard will be delighted to give you any information you may wish for. We are here on his business, not on mine. Go on, Lydyiard. Fire away.”

“I have come to inspect some land,” said Lydyiard, rousing himself with a jerk, “for a colonization project in which I am interested. You will probably know the place,—it is called, I believe, Bishop Meddlicott’s Selection.”

“Yes, I know the place,” said Hagart; “it lies about ten miles from the pilot station, but you’ll have a difficulty in inspecting it without horses or guide.”

“Can neither be procured here?”

“Certainly not, unless you apply to Mr. Overstone.”

“And he lives—”

“At Bully Wallah Station, twenty miles from the Cape.”

Brand made a wry face. “Is there no inn on the island?”

"Fourteen years ago the island was unknown, save upon the chart, as a coast to beware of," replied Hagart with scorn. "There are exactly twelve white people upon it, not counting the spare hands Mr. Overstone employs during mustering. Is it likely there should be an inn?"

"It seems to me that we are in a fix," said Brand.

"I've heard that Mister Overstone means to muster the north end directly," put in Bride. "He'll be here in a day or two—he's bound to send some meat over, for we have been living on goat's flesh for a week or more."

"I have a spare room in my house," said Hagart. "It is at your disposal if you choose; otherwise you must sleep in the bush."

"We accept it with pleasure," exclaimed Brand.

"I am reluctant to trespass upon your hospitality," said Lydyiard with cold politeness; "but I fear that in the present circumstances I have no choice—I was under the impression that I should have no difficulty in reaching Bully Wallah."

The boat grated upon the shingle. The tide was low, and several yards of water intervened before the shore could be reached. The sailors

pulled up their trousers and jumped into the sea, dragging the boat as far as possible. Brand, who did not want for spirit, and was always amiably ready to do what he saw was the correct thing under the circumstances, even though it might involve an unpleasant wetting—followed their example, and Joe Bride turned, and after a momentary hesitation, offered his broad back to Mr. Lydyiard.

“I am not as helpless as you imagine,” said the latter, “or it would have been very unwise of me to venture into the bush. Eighteen years ago I was as active as my young friend here ; nevertheless, my good fellow, I won’t disdain your offer, for you seem well up to my weight.”

Hagart, with the thirst upon him again, turned behind a rock, and while the others were drawing on their shoes, took a pull at his flask.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRINCE APPEARS.

A ROUGH path cut in the cliff, led to the pilot's house. Hagart walked ahead and entered the hut first, beckoning to the strangers to follow him. Mr. Lydyiard held back with a visible reluctance, conquered however in a moment ; but Brand, with a pleased interest in a new dwelling, stepped gaily on to the verandah. Esther had seen the new-comers in the distance, and had retired to the back of the hut, but Brand's quick eyes took in the girl's hat upon the sofa, and the glimpse of a woman's bedchamber visible through its half-open door.

The moment he entered the sitting-room, Mr. Lydyiard's attention was riveted by the crayon drawings already described. Though he had been in a measure prepared for the encounter, he could barely repress a cry of astonishment at finding himself confronted by a ghost of his

early life, in the pictured face of the woman, who had most vitally influenced his career. The suspicion which had been shaping itself in his mind, became certainty, and he was obliged to sit down to recover the shock it had caused him.

Brand had seen his friend's eyes fixed upon the drawings. Having a respect for Lydyiard's knowledge of art, he thought it the correct thing to admire, and uttered an unintelligent criticism. "That's an uncommonly nice picture," he said, pointing to the larger of the two subjects. "Puts me in mind of some of Doré's things. It's exactly like one of his women, but one misses the fellow with the long nose who is always beside her."

Hagart took no notice of the remark, but threw open the door of the third room, which contained two pallet beds and a wash-stand. "This is the only accommodation I can offer you. Pray make the best of it. I must go to my work now, but if you would like anything to eat or drink, it shall be got ready for you."

"Thank you," said Brand; "I am rather hungry—it is some time since we breakfasted."

Hagart pointed to the green bottle upon the sideboard. "There is some brandy." Then he shouted "Esther!" and disappeared into the outer regions, whence the two men caught the sound

of an oath and of a whispered colloquy, and presently they saw the pilot passing the verandah on his way to the beach.

“What a brute!” said Brand. “Yet in spite of his bad language and rough manner, there is something about him, which gives one the idea that he has known better days. What heaps of fellows one sees in Australia who have gone to the devil through drink!”

“Ay,” replied Lydyiard, in a voice that sounded like a groan.

“What is the matter?” asked Brand, suddenly becoming alive to the alteration in his friend’s face. “How pale you are! You’ll make but a poor explorer if you knock up so quickly.”

“It is the sun,” pleaded Lydyiard, faintly; “and the hot walk up the cliff.”

“Try some brandy. There does not seem to be a tumbler anywhere about, but I might forage in the cupboards. Who the deuce is ‘Esther,’ I wonder?”

Almost as Brand spoke the door opened, and Esther, advancing timidly, performed a shy but not ungraceful curtsy. Her large eyes turned from one stranger to the other in a *naïve* surprise. She had never seen any one in her life so handsome as Brand—certainly no one of that superior type. He, too, regarded her with astonished

admiration. He was keenly susceptible to beauty, and for this had not been prepared. He took off his hat and bowed profoundly.

"My father says that you are hungry," said Esther, looking at them with her wonderful eyes. She caught Lydyiard's fixed upon her with a mournful, eager interest, and blushed and looked down. "I'll get dinner ready as soon as I can."

"You are very good. I'm afraid that we are giving trouble," murmured Brand. "My friend here feels seedy with the heat. I ought to introduce him. Mr. Lydyiard, Miss ? ——"

"Esther Hagart," said the girl.

"My name is George Brand. Your father offered us some brandy, and I was just going to forage for a glass."

Esther ran to the back for a jug of water and two cups.

"We have no glass, sir."

"Fair Hebe!" murmured Brand, gallantly. "What more could one desire? Shall I mix for you, Lydyiard? He is not always so silent, Miss Hagart; I can tell you that he is a very clever fellow."

Lydyiard uttered a contemptuous snarl as he poured out some brandy and water, and drank it quickly; then for the first time he addressed

Esther. "You are Mr. Hagart's daughter, I presume?"

"Yes, sir."

"His only child?"

Esther replied again in the affirmative.

"And how old are you?"

"Really Lydyiard," exclaimed Brand, "I must protest. It is scarcely polite to question a young lady in that point blank way, five minutes after your first introduction."

"Pshaw!" said Mr. Lydyiard. "Are we in a Belgravian drawing-room?"

"I shall be seventeen my next birthday," replied Esther simply, "that is, I was sixteen last month."

Lydyiard looked from her to the drawing upon the wall. "You are like the woman's face in that picture. She is your mother?"

"That was my mother, sir," replied Esther.

"Is she dead?" asked Lydyiard eagerly.

"She died four years ago," replied Esther sadly.

"Dead!" repeated Lydyiard in a blank manner; "dead! Well, it is best."

Esther's lips trembled, and she turned away and began to lay the cloth for dinner. Lydyiard took up his hat and left the room, just pausing at the door to say, "Do not wait for me, I am not hungry; I will take a stroll."

"You complained of not feeling well just now," cried Brand in an expostulatory tone, but Lydyiard walked away without taking any notice of his remark. "My friend is a little eccentric," said Brand. "Most talented persons are odd in their manner at times."

"I thought that he looked unhappy," said Esther, fixing her large soft eyes upon Mr. Lydyiard's vanishing figure. "Is he unhappy, sir?"

"Upon my soul I don't know," replied Brand. "Very few people are quite happy, I suppose; but Lydyiard ought to be satisfied. He has plenty of money, and has no one to bother him. To be sure, his ideas are peculiar, and I have read that great minds often make their possessors wretched."

Esther put down the plate she was carrying, and stood still as if she were revolving a problem, "It would be better to have the great mind," she said, "even if it made one wretched."

"He has a scheme on hand," continued Brand. "It is to send some people out here who have no religion in particular, and all kinds of queer notions about progress, and who want to set themselves up as a kind of model colony. I'm hanged if I understand about them, except that they have no money. England you see is all very well for rich people and labourers, and the

very poor whom one has to look after, but Lydyard goes in for political economy and that sort of thing, like John Stuart Mill, you know. Oh, he is a wonderfully clever person, and my uncle, Lord Coniston, thinks a great deal of him."

Esther was not so much impressed by Brand's communications as he had intended her to be; she left the room, and presently returned, bearing a smoking dish of meat which she placed upon the table.

"That is a curious looking joint," said Brand.

"It is kid, sir."

Brand laughed, "What an odd notion it is, being fed like the patriarchs! But I am not to eat alone?"

"I don't think father will come in, sir: it is not long since he breakfasted."

Brand insisted that she should bear him company, and they sat down together; but he was too hungry to find fault with his fare or to talk much. When he had finished, Esther removed the plates, and Brand threw himself back in his chair, longing inwardly for something stronger than water to wash down his repast.

"Now, how shall we spend the afternoon?" he said. "A stroll round the beach, and a cigar, if you didn't mind smoke, would be delightful.

Will you come and show me the way, Miss Hagart?"

"I am quite sure that you could not lose yourself, sir," said Esther; "and I don't think that I could come now. I have to wash these plates and dishes, and to prepare your room for to-night."

It was evident that the pilot kept no servant, and somehow the idea of this adorably pretty child of nature acting as maid of all work, was so repugnant to Brand's æsthetic ideas that he pressed her no further for her companionship, but departed, muttering that he would seek his friend. He lit his cigar, and wandered round the cliff, but without seeing any traces of Lydyiard, who, evidently desiring solitude, had chosen a path in which he was not likely to be overtaken. Brand would have felt better pleased had his company been solicited. Like most vain persons, he admired talent, when it was not placed in aggressive relationship with his own superficiality. He had been pleased that Lydyiard should have invited him to join his exploring expedition, and wished that all the world should know what a distinguished man had chosen him for a companion. The good or evil repute of individuals, depended more or less, in Brand's mind, upon their connection with himself. The truth

was, that the young man had got into a scrape about a woman in Sydney—an Antipodean *Lais*, who was ruthlessly fleecing her young adorer; and in an inconsistent impulse of benevolence towards one with whom he had nothing in common, Lydyiard had procured Brand leave from head-quarters, and had carried him out of harm's way.

A word about Lydyiard. He had commenced life as the incumbent of a family living, with a younger son's portion, since considerably augmented by an inheritance from a mercantile relation. He was ending it as a positivist, a dabbler in science, and in the moral and theological questions of the day. He was the friend of political economists, and wrote for some of the higher-thought magazines. He was alone in the world, and spent much of his time in travelling. There was a story barely extant of his early marriage, and subsequent desertion, but it was almost forgotten by the few persons who knew the circumstances; and the world at large was utterly ignorant of his private history. He had not in the days of his connection with the Church been a person of any notoriety. Whatever mental struggles he might have undergone had been kept hidden in his own breast, and till his secession to the ranks of atheism, he had never aired his

views in the faces of the orthodox. He had rather cherished dreams of a life of obscurity and domestic happiness, and not till these had faded into the grey of disappointment, had he changed his mode of existence, and promulgated the extreme opinions which had since become associated with his name.

Brand wandered on by the coast, more for the sake of something to do, than from any pleasure that the sea afforded him. He did not care for solitude, and had he not been thinking of Esther, would have been dull indeed. The half-revealed capacity in the girl's face, though he did not understand it, attracted him. The extreme refinement of her appearance puzzled him; and he was angry that she should live in so mean a house, and perform duties which seemed to him to degrade her, and to degrade his own admiration of her. Understand, that he had no purely unselfish dislike to seeing the hands of a tender girl sullied by rough labour, but he objected to the work because it brought unpleasant visions into his mind, and interfered with his enjoyment of Esther's beauty and unconscious grace.

After an hour's walk over shingle and sand, studded with dead jellyfish, and strewn with stranded seaweed and shells, Brand took a turn

inland, leaving the coast a little to his right. About the distance of a mile from the pilot station, in a little valley between the sea-line upon one side, and a bare hill upon the other, he came upon a small enclosure. It was fenced in by white railings, and looked green compared with the surrounding herbage, and it contained a mound—a grave probably—though there was neither monument or inscription to denote whether it was that of man, woman, or beast. A rose-bush in full bloom shed its blossoms upon the turf, and a tiny cross of white shells, looking in the distance like flowers, was placed upon it.

A grave in the midst of solitude, in a place where it is least to be expected, brings a chill to the most careless. Brand never gave much thought to death. He was of too pleasure-loving a temperament to care to be reminded that he was mortal. He wondered whether this was the grave of Esther's mother, and if so, whether it was she who tended it so carefully. He turned his back upon it, and went away a few paces to a sheltered nook, where he lit a cigar, and, tired with the walk, stretched himself lazily upon the grass. The soft air, the swash of the waves, and the buzz of innumerable insects around him, made him drowsy, and soon after

he had thrown away the end of his cigar, he was asleep.

It was sunset when he awoke and stretched himself. The flutter of a woman's garment about the grave attracted his attention, and peering cautiously round the rock which sheltered him from her view, he saw Esther sitting in the enclosure. Her hands were clasped before her, her eyes were fixed dreamily upon the sea, and tears were flowing softly down her cheeks—tears which did no detriment to her beauty, for the setting sun shed a glow upon her face, and seemed to surround her with a soft radiance. Her loneliness—the hour—her picturesque attitude—the sight of her grief—fired Brand to enthusiastic pity. He crept softly round to the enclosure, entered the open gate, and stood beside her, almost before she was aware of his presence.

“Oh! why are you crying?” he asked, with great tenderness. “Do not cry. Can I not do anything to help you?”

Esther looked at him, too wonderstruck at first by his solicitude to be grateful for the sorrow he expressed. To be pitied in a sympathetic way was so new to her. No one since her mother's death had troubled themselves much about what she was thinking or feeling. To be sure, Joe Bride forcibly expressed his indignation

at any tangible ill-treatment she received, and Mrs. Overstone openly told her that she was a fool to remain with a man who beat her; but this was something quite different, and quite outside her ordinary experiences.

"I am so sorry for you," continued Brand. "I could see from the first moment I saw you to-day that you were unhappy, and I longed to comfort you."

"Thank you, sir," replied Esther, looking up at him with eyes through which her heart went trustingly out to him.

"But you will not tell me what grieves you. You will not believe that I feel for you as deeply as if—as if—," pausing for words, "you were my sister. You look upon me as a stranger, and perhaps think me impertinent for offering you sympathy?"

"No, no," cried Esther, stung to remorse by the imputation of ingratitude. "How could your being sorry for me seem impertinent? You are so good—so kind; but it is difficult to explain, sir; I don't know why I cried—I was lonely and wanted my mother, and—" she sobbed again.

"Poor child," said Brand, and he ventured to touch her hand, and then to stroke it softly. She was so bewitching in her grief, that had

he yielded to impulse, he would have kissed her tears away ; but though she was such a child, and though she seemed so entirely innocent, and was so much below himself, he dared not venture upon such a caress. "I am so sorry for you," he repeated ; "I am not surprised that you are lonely and that you miss your mother. This is her grave, I suppose. Tell me—is it long since she died ? "

"Four years—four years last August ; and this is November," answered Esther with unconscious pathos. "She is buried here."

"Go on, my poor child," said Brand, pressing her hand. "Tell me all that you will of yourself, of your sorrow. You don't know how interested I feel in you."

"Sir," asked Esther, looking at him with trusting eyes, "you know perhaps, and you will not think me foolish for asking—can the dead, if they see those they love cruelly treated and miserable—can they come back again ? "

It was a matter which George Brand had never considered. It was not his habit to reflect deeply upon abstract questions. So-called spiritualism had always been to him a subject for ridicule. Had the question been put to him in a different fashion, he would probably have laughed then. As it was, he answered a little awkwardly, "I

don't know; some think they do, but it is all nonsense. I mean it is impossible. People can never come back after they are dead. They would not be the same, you know."

"No," said Esther, "of course they would not be the same. They would be sweeter and lovelier and less unhappy. It is such a comfort to think that no one cries when they are dead. I should like to feel sure that it is so. Sometimes I feel almost certain that it is, and Joe Bride thinks so too."

"What put the notion into your head?"

"Sometimes when I am wakeful at night, and the house is quite still, I can feel my mother bending over me, and I fancy that if it were light, I should be able to see her face. When I am alone and unhappy she seems to say, 'Never mind, darling,' just as she used when she was alive; and when I am walking by myself in the bush the air seems full of shapes, and her voice tells me to be brave and to bear. And I will bear," added the girl with a resolute tightening of her lips. "They have asked me to go away, but I never will—for I promised her that I would not."

"Who have asked you?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Overstone. They think that I might live at Bully Wallah and help with the

children, but I will not ; I only go to them when Joe tells me that I ought."

Esther withdrew her hand which Brand had retained within his own, and began to uproot the inch-high grass that had sprung up among the shells on the grave. Had her fingers been like those of a kitchen maid, with thick epidermis and sullied tips, George would have felt no inclination to regain their possession ; but they were tapering, and if brown, had no trace of coarseness. She was deficient in none of those critical points which are patent to men. Her ears were small and shell-like ; her hair was glossy and well kept ; the frill round her neck immaculate. She might have been a princess disguised in a faded and ill-made cotton gown.

"I cannot understand you," exclaimed George impulsively.

"Why?" asked Esther.

"You are so—so—" he pulled himself up on the verge of a compliment, and added, "so different to what one would have expected to see here. Esther—may I call you Esther?—you seem such a child, and 'Miss Hagart' is so inappropriate—you will let me call you Esther?"

Esther saw nothing strange in the request. It would have appeared incongruous had he continued to address her as Miss Hagart.

"Every one calls me Esther—and why not you?"

"Every one!" exclaimed Brand with some pique; "who is every one?"

"All the people I see—the sailors, and Mr. and Mrs. Overstone."

"And have you no other acquaintances? Are there no young gentlemen for instance, whom you like, and who come occasionally to see you?"

"I don't know any young men. Mrs. Overstone says that there are many on the mainland, but they never come here. I don't think," she added reflectively, "that I ever saw a young gentleman in my life before—yes, once, at Bully Wallah."

"Who was he?"

"A new chum, who was with Mr. Overstone for a little time, but they did not like him, and he went away."

"Esther, I want to be your friend. I am so sorry for you, and you seem to me so gentle and refined. I should like to make your life happier. Will you let me try?"

With his words a new phase of existence seemed to open before Esther. A young man with pitiful eyes, and a soft voice, who wore good clothes—far better than even Mr. Overstone's town-going garments—and whose ways

were unlike those of the people among whom she lived, spoke tenderly to her, and offered to try and make her lot pleasanter. The very fact of his interest, seemed to her sufficient guarantee for the fulfilment of his vague promise. The meeting with him beside her mother's grave, and his association with the most hallowed influence of her life; the suddenness and strangeness of his arrival upon the island, made his advent seem like the direct answer to her petitions.

"We will be friends," continued Brand, taking her hand again, "and we can sympathise with each other. You may be a comfort to me as well, for I too am lonely sometimes."

"You, sir!" repeated Esther incredulously.

"You may think it strange, but it is true. You see I am older than you are, and though I have knocked about the world, and have things to do, of which you know nothing, I am just as lonely in reality. And a man is different to a girl—he gets low and hipped very often. What he wants is a sweet, tender little creature—a friend, who will always care for him no matter what he does. If you were a man, you would grow tired of shooting, and billiards, balls, and dinners, and that sort of thing, if you had no one to be fond of—of course," added Brand, his vanity correcting his statements, "I don't mean

that there would not be many people to care for one if one wished, but perhaps they would not be quite the persons whom one could like in return. Do you understand, Esther?"

"I am not sure that I do, sir, for I have had so few pleasures, or friends either; and I have always cared for the people who have liked me."

"But if the 'new chum'—the fellow at Bully Wallah—had liked you, and I have no doubt that he did, would you have cared for him in return?"

"They laughed at him, sir, and he was stupid and ugly, and covered with mosquito bites."

"You see," said Brand, "it is not every one of whom one is able to make a friend. We may go on for long and not stumble across the right person. One may meet people one likes, but only on the surface as it were. You can make a friend of me, Esther, can you not?"

"I think so, sir," murmured Esther, shyly.

"That is right. And remember that we have made the compact here by your mother's grave, and it must not be broken."

Neither of them considered how soon Brand's stay at the pilot station might terminate—that seemed of little consequence. Esther sat still, her arm thrown over the mound, her heart full of a

new, strange happiness. Brand's allusion to her dead mother seemed to ratify and renew all her first impressions of him. He had, consciously or unconsciously, touched the spring of sympathy, and without formulating her ideas, Esther took it for granted that their minds ran in a like groove, as the young do take things for granted, when they build up a character in perfect harmony with their own, on the slender foundation of a chance or premeditated appeal to their tenderest susceptibilities.

The light was fading into greyness, but the soft shadows seemed all in keeping with the delightful discovery, that there was a young heart in the world ready to share the burden of loneliness and misconception which her heart had borne. George had, during the pause, lighted another cigar. The pretty flint that he used, while she mechanically watched the process, the fragrant puffs of smoke, the perfume upon his handkerchief, all combined to heighten the delicate intoxication. Esther awakened with a start to a sense of the lateness of the hour, and of the duties which awaited her at home.

"Oh!" she cried guiltily, "I must go back. I have to get supper ready. See how late it is!"

Brand gave a little shiver. He had been in

that state of dreamy enjoyment, which a certain type of man might feel, when smoking by the sea-shore, upon a calm tropical evening, with a pretty girl, too lately known to have ceased to be interesting, within arm's length of him.

"Esther! I was so thoroughly happy, I could have sat on by your side for ever, but that suggestion of supper destroyed all my pleasure. I hate to think of you reddening your face over a fire, and doing the work of housemaid or scullion."

"But you would hate still more, sir, to have nothing to eat," said Esther, with a shy archness.

"True, and under present conditions, life would be little short of Elysium if there were a well-served dinner and a bottle of old wine awaiting us on our return. Well, let us go!"

CHAPTER IV.

A DISTURBED NIGHT.

IT was quite dark when Esther and her companion reached the pilot's hut. Mr. Lydyiard was sitting in one of the squatters' chairs in the verandah.

"So you are back before us," said Brand. "Have you had a long walk? I looked for you, but could not find you. I daresay that you are hungry."

"Yes, I am hungry," said Lydyiard, speaking in an oddly constrained voice, and looking at Esther. "Perhaps you will give me something to eat? It is humiliating to discover the necessity for food."

"Why humiliating?" asked Brand. "We are all alike, and I for my part, should be sorry to do away with one of the pleasures of existence. It was only a few moments ago that I was wishing for a well-cooked dinner. Not," he added in a lower tone, for Esther had gone into the

sitting-room, and was lighting the lamp, "that the wish is likely to be gratified here. I should be perfectly satisfied with my quarters if the *cuisine* were better. We had boiled kid for luncheon to-day. It always puzzled me how Rebecca contrived to take in Isaac in the matter of the venison, and I am more than ever convinced that the old patriarch was a rank duffer."

"I have tasted worse fare," said Lydyiard.

"What do you think of our prospects?" asked Brand, carelessly.

"I am not at all certain that Mundoolan Island will suit my purposes," replied Lydyiard shortly.

"If there were any means of departure I would leave it immediately; but the sailor Bride tells me that steamers pass irregularly, and do not always stop when signalled. I have been taking directions about the road, and intend setting off to-morrow for Bully Wallah."

"Walking!" exclaimed Brand, aghast. "How can you manage that?"

"I am more active than you suppose, and the nights are warm; we can camp half way."

"Oh!" said Brand, a little crestfallen, "I don't much care about that plan. I am very happy here, and would rather wait till something turns up."

“You will of course please yourself,” said Lydyiard. “I shall do the same.”

He spoke so curtly, that Brand began to question whether talented peculiar beings were the pleasantest travelling companions.

Esther had lighted the lamp within, and had placed the obnoxious kid, with some bread and tea, upon the table.

“Supper is ready, sir. I don’t know whether father has come in—perhaps you can tell me?”

“No,” answered Lydyiard, “but I heard sounds in an adjoining room. He may have returned before me.”

Esther disappeared into the little passage which ran through the hut, and knocked at the door of her father’s bedroom; waiting a moment, she entered softly. Though the door was closed, the two men distinctly heard what passed on the other side of the partition.

“Father,” she asked, “will you come to tea?”

“Go away! What the — do I want with tea?” replied a thick, drunken voice from within. “Send me some more brandy and let me get drunk. I’m happy when I am drunk. I’m safe then. Drink drives the devils away.”

There was a whispered entreaty or expostulation, then the sound of a scuffle, and a violent

rejoinder in language which may be softened upon this page. "I don't want to have anything to do with the gentlemen. What has Lydyiard come here for? I suppose he thinks that I have forgotten him. It is all — nonsense about his colony; I know that very well. Go and get me some brandy — you. Do you hear?"

"Father, there is no more left," cried poor Esther. "Oh, don't hurt me; it is not my fault. They should have brought some from Frazerville last week, but it was forgotten."

"That is a lie. I don't believe a word you say. You have hidden it because you are so selfish that you cannot bear me to forget my misery for an hour. You are just like your mother. Was ever man cursed with such a tormenting devil? but I'll be even with you—I'll drink till the brandy oozes out of every pore in my body. Then you may say, if you choose, that the smell sickens you. Oh, go away and leave me—I hate the sight of you."

It was evident that Hagart was confusing Esther with her mother, who had suffered in his alternate fits of violence and remorseful tenderness. He had been nipping all the afternoon, and coming in to search for more brandy, had finished the bottle which had been produced

for the refreshment of the strangers. Now he had shut himself up in his room, and would either fall asleep or become dangerous. Esther was perfectly aware of this, and her one thought was to escape from his vicinity.

"I want to go," she said, "but I cannot. You are holding me so tight."

"There, then!" And there was the shock of a fall, and the slight wall shook with the weight of the girl's body, thrown violently against it.

"The brute will kill her," exclaimed Brand, rising in agitation. "I can't stand this. It makes my blood curdle to think of her in there with him alone." He was moving to the door when Lydyiard, who had been listening, stopped him.

"Don't go. The girl has risen and is coming back. He shall not touch her again."

Esther staggered into the room, and sank upon a chair.

"Are you hurt?" asked Lydyiard, anxiously.

She did not reply immediately, and they thought for a moment that she had been injured by her fall.

"Say something," implored Brand. "Your forehead is bleeding. I am sure that you are hurt."

Esther put up her hand to her brow, and drew

it back stained with blood. "It is only a scratch. He threw me against the door. It doesn't hurt much. He was drunk,—and he minds nothing when he is drunk. Don't trouble—no one ever cared except my mother, and he beat her too sometimes."

Lydyiard made a movement with his clenched hand, and Brand said quickly, "*I* care, Esther. My heart bleeds for you. Let me tie my handkerchief round your head—so."

He bound up the wound a little awkwardly, but his touch thrilled gratefully through the girl's frame. Presently she rose and tottered to the door of her chamber, pausing to say, "Sit down and eat; he will not disturb you, and you must be hungry. Don't mind him, perhaps he will go to sleep." Then she retreated—closing and bolting the door behind her.

"Esther," said Brand reproachfully, "it is not your father we mind about; it is you."

"Leave her alone," said Lydyiard. "You can do her no good."

"Esther!" repeated Brand. "Only say one word. Tell me if you are in pain?"

"No!" was the muffled reply.

"Can I do nothing for you?"

"No, no! I am safe here. He cannot come in to me."

"He shall kill me," exclaimed Brand, vehemently, "before he molests you again!"

Lydyiard sat down, and commenced his supper.

"How can you eat?" said Brand, pushing away his plate.

"You forget that I have scarcely tasted food to-day."

"My appetite has quite gone—the smell of brandy sickens me."

"Pshaw! You have seen men drunk before now."

"It is not that. I am not more squeamish than most people. It is that poor girl. I am haunted by the dumb misery upon her face. To think that a man can sink so low as to ill-treat a beautiful, helpless creature like that! Yet Hagart does not look like the conventional drunkard, who kicks his wife, and beats his children. I wonder if he was ever a gentleman!"

"Perhaps! but you have seen enough of Australia to be aware, that here, vice and drink level all classes."

"Lydyiard!" said Brand, struck by a sudden thought, "do you know anything of this man?"

"Why do you ask, Brand?"

"I don't know. Something in your manner to-day, and his own words to Esther, made the thought rise to my mind. To be sure, the man is so drunk that he cannot have known what he was saying."

"Don't trouble yourself to think of it, George. I can tell you nothing of the pilot's antecedents."

"He seems quiet now," said Brand, after a pause. "Do you suppose that he will attempt to enter her room?"

"Esther cannot be harmed. Joe Bride tells me that he has put a bolt upon her door, and that she is quite safe at night."

"You seem to have been having a long conversation with Bride."

"He has been giving me a description of the island," answered Lydyiard, not thinking it necessary to inform Brand that he had also learned much from Joe about the pilot and his family.

"I shall not sleep a wink to-night," said Brand. "Come and let us smoke a cigar in the verandah. I cannot leave this place to-morrow, Lydyiard."

"As you please, Brand."

"I must stay and protect that poor girl from further ill-treatment."

“George,” said Lydyiard, laying his hand upon the young man’s arm, “I am your uncle’s friend, and may give you a word of advice. I have seen enough of you to know that you are dangerous to women. Do not injure this young girl’s peace of mind. I see that she attracts you ; but remember that you do not meet on equal ground. She is as helpless as an unfledged sparrow.”

“What do you take me for?” cried Brand, warmly. “You judge me wrongly. Do you suppose that I am capable of harming her?”

“I know that you once ruined an innocent girl,” said Lydyiard sternly.

“I was a boy then,” said Brand, and went on smoking in silence for a few minutes. Presently he said, as though to escape from an unpleasant subject—“There is only one thing to be said in favour of these bush huts. Neither outrage nor robbery can take place in them without being heard by every inmate. Esther is safe for to-night. To-morrow it will be time enough to consider our movements. Won’t you have a cigar, Lydyiard?”

“No, thank you,” replied Lydyiard. “I will leave you ; for I am very tired, and if I cannot sleep, will at least try and rest.”

Brand went on smoking and contemplating the southern constellations for an hour longer.

The moon was rising over the feathery tips of the bread-fruit trees, and the sea in front of him, and the forest stretching into blackness behind the cape, gave a sense of solitude and vastness which was almost bewildering. Out of the bush there came a low monotonous baying of native dogs, and at intervals a melancholy whistle of curlews; but within, all was quiet. "How unlike it is to everything English!" murmured the young man, "and how impossible it would be to treat Esther like a conventional young lady." It almost seemed to him that the fact of her up-bringing, under conditions so dissimilar to those which govern the existence of most women, gave him ample licence in his relations with her. He waited on in the vain hope of her reappearance, and then, disappointed, listened at her door for a minute, and murmured below his breath "Esther," salving his conscience with the assurance that he wished to satisfy himself of her well-being; but no response came, and he was obliged reluctantly to seek his chamber: there he found Lydyiard lying dressed and broad awake upon one of the two uninviting beds.

Brand surveyed with supreme dissatisfaction the meagre preparations for his repose. He protested that under the circumstances sleep would be quite out of the question, but he was

young enough not to be seriously disturbed by a hard couch, and after grumbling at intervals at the discomfort he was called upon to endure, and at Lydyiard's philosophic resignation to fate, turned over, and went into a sound sleep.

Not so Lydyiard. He tossed about for several hours, alert at the smallest sound. Once he rose and tried Esther's door to satisfy himself that it was securely bolted. It seemed to him as he lay awake, his nerves on the stretch, and his impressions intensified by the darkness and strangeness of the place, that he had walked un-awares into the midst of a tragedy, with which his own life was intimately interwoven.

By and by Hagart awoke from his drunken sleep, and Lydyiard could hear him muttering and groping about in his chamber—then all was quiet again. Lydyiard could not bear to lie still any longer. He got up and sat by the window, which he opened, letting in the silvery radiance, while he looked out upon the lighthouse, and the never-ending expanse of ocean glistening in the moonlight. He felt that after his discovery of to-day, this place could never be to him as an ordinary resting-place in his wanderings. The bluff cape would always be imprinted in vivid colouring and bold outlines upon his memory, and he seemed already to know its ins and outs,

its various phases of storm and sunshine, as though he had lived upon it for years. It was difficult to imagine the high-spirited woman he had known, wearing out here a hopeless and miserable existence. Then he bethought him that she must be buried somewhere on the cape. A longing seized him to go out in the moonlight and find her grave; to gaze upon the sod which covered her, when no one could look pryingly at him, or inquire the cause of his emotion. Not that he had any intention of giving way to sentimental grief—that, if he had ever felt any, had been worn out long ago; but he wanted to convince himself of the fact of her existence here, and of the reality of her death.

It was easy, supporting himself by the window-sill, to let himself gently down till his feet touched the incline upon which the house was built, and as the clock in the sitting-room struck one, guided by an unaccountable instinct, he descended the cliff, and walked on by the same path which Esther and George had followed a few hours before.

In time he reached the enclosure, and though there was no tangible evidence of the fact, he knew intuitively that this was the grave of Esther's mother. He walked up to the railings, and leaning over them, looked for a little while

fixedly at the mound, without being aware that a dark figure, partially concealed by the rose-bush Esther had planted, lay motionless beside it. Lydyiard buried his face in his hands and shook with the pent-up agitation which had all day been struggling for vent. "Eugenie," he said, half aloud, "I am glad to know your fate, though it is wretched enough to stir up all my dead remorse. Your life had no joy, and you died without honour. Your dream of ideal happiness apart from duty, has ended as might have been foreseen. It was like a woman to hope that thistles could yield grapes !"

His voice roused the mourner, and Lydyiard started back as he beheld Hagart slowly raise himself, looking ghastly in the moonlight, with protruding eyes and nervously twitching fingers. He stretched his arms out over the grave, staring through and beyond the figure by the railings, as though he saw something spectral behind it ; and it was so to the drunken man—he had awakened from his sleep, and with the fit upon him had seen his dead wife standing outside in the moonlight, beckoning him on to her grave.

"This is true melodrama," muttered Lydyiard, turning away, but unable to avoid hearing the address which Hagart was making to the ghostly figure of his imagination.

“I have come,” he said in a low, awestruck voice, “I have come because you wanted me ; I have not brought the knife, for I was afraid that if you saw it, it might frighten you away, Eugenie. Eugenie, don’t leave me, I am so wretched. There is a creature inside me always gnawing ; it has sharp pointed teeth ; it is slimy like a snake. It never gives me any rest except when I am drunk. I have fearful dreams. I sometimes dream that I have killed you—but I know that cannot be true. *They* are to blame for it. They have long white fingers, like adders’ tails. They point to the knife, and they make signs to me to cut my throat. I can see the blood spirting out. Oh, it is horrible ! horrible ! Why do you let them torment me ? I am safe with you. Why don’t you stay and take care of me ? Oh, my life, stay with me ! I did not mean to knock you down. You bring me here, and then you disappear. Why don’t you like this place ? It is very pretty, and the grass is green. It will be red some day—when I take the knife. Oh Lord, she is gone ! There’s a man standing there now ! You —, what are you doing here ? I know you—you’re Woolston, my father’s bailiff. You’re running away. Ha ! I’ll give you a chase.”

The pilot leaped the railings, and passing close by Lydyiard, of whom he took no notice, darted up the low sandbank, and down to the shore, divesting himself as he ran, of each article of clothing, till he stood naked in the moonlight ; and then, with a wild toss of his arms and a mad shout, he plunged into the waves and swam out to sea.

Horried at the scene he had witnessed, Mr. Lydyiard turned to leave the spot. Pausing for a moment at the enclosure, he stooped over the railings, and gathered a rose, which he placed in his breast. It was an act of sentimentalism for which he could hardly account. He climbed the hill facing the sea, and found himself upon a broad plateau overlooking the ocean on both sides. The air was sweet and balmy, and nature offered a more attractive bed-chamber than that he had quitted. Choosing a couch of dry grass and stunted herbage, he lay down, and lulled by the murmur of the waves, was soon asleep.

He was awakened by the ground vibration caused by the rapid thud of horses' hoofs, and the words uttered in a loud spluttering voice, "I say, my man, take care that you are not ridden over. It's unsafe to lie down straight in the track. Ef I hadn't been looking at the

road, my horse might have shied with me and pitched me. And a buster ain't pleasant for a man of my weight."

Lydyiard rose confusedly, and discovered that while his head had been pillowed upon a furze-bush, his legs had encumbered a narrow bridle path which led from the pilot station to the bush. There seemed a great deal of truth in the rider's remark, for he was undoubtedly a large man—sixteen stone or more—and his absent blue eyes and uncertain mode of speech corroborated the suggestion conveyed in his words, that he did not always look where he was going. He was dressed in a Crimean shirt and riding breeches, and was mounted upon a great shambling brute, which had the solitary merit of looking up to weight. He carried a stockwhip, and was followed by a tribe of kangaroo dogs, while he led another animal, saddled for a lady, and which also bore two canvas bags, that were ingeniously strapped on to the pommels of the side saddle, and were filled with pieces of raw meat.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Lydyiard. "I walked up here during the night, and did not notice where I lay down."

"During the night!" repeated the squatter. "Now that's a curious thing! Haven't you got

any blankets? Couldn't they put you up at the pilot station?"

"They offered me a bed," said Lydyiard; "but I slept in the open air by choice."

"Now that's a thing I shouldn't do too often ef I were you. Young fellers may lie on the ground without its hurting them, but when you come to our age, it means lumbago. How is Hagart? But I don't suppose there is any use in my asking, for of course he is drunk. There's a man now that's always drunk. It beats me where he gets the grog, for I have warned the storekeepers at Frazerville. Now that's a thing! Ef they would only put a heavy duty on sperrits, and take it off colonial wine, fellows like Hagart couldn't afford to make beasts of themselves. Did you say he was drunk?"

"I saw him last dancing naked upon the beach."

"It's a disgrace," said the squatter. "I am glad that I came over to-day. I had to bring some meat for the men, and I thought that I would take Hagart's daughter back with me. Now that's a dreadful thing you know! We told her that she might come and live with us provided that she made herself useful—I never keep any one on my station who does not earn his grub—but she refused to leave her father."

"May I ask," said Lydyiard, "whether I have the pleasure of speaking to Mr. Overstone of Bully Wallah?"

"You have my very name, sir—Overstone of Bully Wallah, that's it. Perhaps you have heard it in connection with the salt question?"

"The salt question!" repeated Lydyiard, wonderingly.

"The duty, you know; I have made the legislature take off the intercolonial duty. It'll be the salvation of the country. Now I can tell you, there's not a man in Australia, who knows more about salt than I do."

"Indeed!" replied Lydyiard, slightly puzzled. "It's a very useful article of diet."

"It's more than that. It's the salvation of man and beast in Australia. I have proved it in the House, sir; and as for practical demonstration, you won't see healthier cattle or children than mine on this side of the equator. It's all salt. Are you a cattle-owner?"

"No," replied Lydyiard, "I regret that I am not."

"Perhaps you're wanting to free select," said Mr. Overstone, eyeing him with that suspicion which is usually engendered in the mind of a squatter by the advent of a stranger, whose motives do not appear to lie on the surface.

"May I ask your business here? You did not cross the Narrows, did you?"

"I came by steamer from Sydney, and landed yesterday at the Cape."

"I said to my man, as we were mustering the Wattle Tree camp, that a steamer was letting off smoke by the pilot station; and it was to drop you, I suppose?"

Lydyiard took a pocket-book from his waistcoat pocket, and producing therefrom an official looking document addressed in a clerkly hand to himself, handed it to Mr. Overstone.

"That is my name; and if you will kindly read this letter, it will explain my business."

Mr. Overstone read the letter carefully, evidently taking in its gist but slowly. "I see," he said, after a few moments of rumination. "This is from Cleaver—Secretary of Lands—you know. I'm well acquainted with Cleaver; he seconded my motion on salt. I did not expect that Cleaver would do me such a bad turn as to send a free selector on to my run. I see that this authorises you to inspect Bishop Meddlcott's selection. I have nothing to do with that land; it belongs to the Government; but if you intend to stock it, I must just inform you that the right of crossing the Narrows belongs to me. Now you see that you can't swim your

cattle across Frazer's Bay—and the land is useless."

"You have an antipathy to free selectors, Mr. Overstone?"

"I shouldn't dislike 'em if they behaved fair, and kept 'emselves to agriculture. Now that's a thing, sir, that requires developping. The farmers in this colony, they don't work their land properly, and so it does not pay, and they end by stealing their neighbours' cattle. I don't mean anything personal."

"I hope that my colonists, if they come here, will be fairly honest, Mr. Overstone."

"Or," continued Mr. Overstone, "ef they don't steal, they bring pleuro or the scab. I had a sheep station before I came here, and I felt it, sir—the scab I mean—in my pocket. That ain't agriculture, which is a subject I have studied."

"Do you happen among other things to have turned your attention to emigration?"

"I can't say that I'm fond of the subject; but that's a thing that ought to be looked to. They send the scum of Great Britain out here, and I don't see that that class of Britishers does any good to Australia beyond increasing her population. My father was an American, and we are a go-ahead set of people."

"You are right," said Lydyiard; "Australia would be the better, if emigration were confined to a higher class of settlers. I speak from no practical experience, Mr. Overstone, and should be glad of any hints you can give me. I ought to explain that I am not personally interested in the taking up of land. I am here on behalf of ten or twelve superior labouring men. Men with energy, and aims—at present misdirected. They want a field which is not to be found in England, and at my suggestion, talk of forming themselves into a community and settling in Australia. They are men a grade above the ordinary working class, with ideas beyond their station, and talents that have been diverted by circumstance into unhealthy channels. They would go in for agriculture, and I am here to select land suitable for their purposes. As far as I can see, this colony seems to have excellent capabilities."

"Enormous," said Mr. Overstone, with conviction. "The land will grow anything, but it must be treated fairly. Errigation! Now that's a thing for a practical man to look into! What salt is to the cattle-owner, errigation is to the agriculturist,—but these dolts won't see it."

"I have no doubt that you are right, Mr. Overstone."

“I have proved it, sir. You’ll come home with me and read my pamphlets—they’d be of enormous value to you in the carrying out of your scheme. On the whole I am inclined to like it. I warm at anything go-ahead. I’m a go-ahead man myself. It’s a pity there ain’t more such. A superior class of emigrants, that’s what we want ; but no combination of cattle and agriculture. Now that’s a point upon which I am very strong, it’s one of my principles ; and ef we talk alike I’ll not say a word against your colony.” Mr. Overstone considered the matter for a minute or two, nodding his head at intervals, as though mentally ticking off the various bearings. “Hum, hum, yes. There’d be a market for stock that couldn’t travel, and a halfpenny a pound in for carriage, and cultivation ! Now that’s a thing that would answer. I should be saved the deuce of a bother with my corn paddock. A contract might be managed. We’ll talk it over, Mr. Lydyiard. I like to know what I’m doing ; and I have got views—views that might be useful. Of course you have brought no horses with you. Well, you had better come back to Bully Wallah with me. You won’t find the pilot station comfortable quarters. You shall read my pamphlets, and we’ll talk this matter out. I am busy mustering just now, and all the horses and hands

are hard at work ; but as soon as that is done with, you shall ride to the selection and look it over at your own time. All fair and above-board, Mr. Lydyiard. I can see that you are a gentleman."

Lydyiard bowed in acknowledgment of Mr. Overstone's discernment. "I am much obliged for your offer, and accept it with gratitude ; but I am not alone, Lieutenant Brand, of the —— Regt. is travelling with me."

"Let him come too. We can put him up at Bully Wallah, and I daresay that I can manage two mounts to the station. I brought this horse for Esther Hagart. Perhaps you will be good enough to lead him to the hut, while I ride back to the camp where my men are drafting, to fetch two spare animals ?"

Mr. Overstone threw the bridle of the horse he was leading, to Lydyiard, and, followed by his dogs, galloped off in the direction whence he had come, with more alacrity than might have been expected from so fat and viewy a person.

CHAPTER V.

A RIDE THROUGH THE BUSH.

AN instinct of coquetry, the first she had known in her life, caused Esther to put on her best frock upon the morning after the arrival of the strangers. It was only of white cotton, but it was simple and pure, and was singularly unlike the Sunday garb of most girls in her position in life. She looked to Brand, as, fresh from his morning's swim, he joined her in the verandah, like a lily which has just lifted its head after a storm. He held out his hand to her with an air of tender regard.

"How are you this morning? I felt so unhappy about you last night. It was dreadful to think of you alone and suffering. I even listened at your door to hear if you were crying. Should you have been very angry with me, if you had known that I was there?"

Esther looked at him gratefully, but knew not how to reply.

“I see that your forehead is a little marked,” continued Brand, noticing a blue spot just below the parting of her hair, “but it is not as bad as I feared it might be. Poor little bruise!” and he passed his fingers over the place with a touch that felt like a caress. “I have brought you a flower, Esther, to show you that I remembered our compact of friendship yesterday. It is all that I could find, and I am afraid that you will hardly think it worth offering; but you’ll wear it, won’t you—just to please me?” It was a sprig of the sweet-scented native jasmine, which grows in stunted bushes upon the barren hills by the sea-side. Esther could not help blushing as she placed the blossom in her breast; though she would have found it difficult to explain why. Hitherto, her dreamy eyes had looked into her own heart, and out upon the faces of those around her, without suspicion of hidden motives or inner complex machinery. She had never had to do with abstract, indefinite emotion, in herself or in others; but here was a dawning consciousness that was new to her. . . . She had been dreaming about George Brand during the night, associating the tender pity in his looks and words with the angelic sweetness of her mother’s face,

as she saw it in her daily and nightly visions, till one seemed an emanation from the other. She felt that she had found a friend unlike such other friends as the Overstones and Joe Bride—people who had tried to brighten her lot in a rough, kind-hearted way ; and yet she was shy of her new friend, and thought of him in a manner that was half awesome, half-delightful.

“I have lost Lydyiard,” said Brand. “He disappeared in the night, and now I fancy that I see him on the cliff yonder. I am a little short-sighted ; but perhaps you can tell me who the man on horseback is to whom he is talking ?”

“It is Mr. Overstone,” exclaimed Esther, with an accent of pleasure. She had been mentally shrinking, poor child ! from the exhibition which her father in one of his fits, would make before the strangers ; but Mr. Overstone’s presence promised stay and relief.

Brand’s countenance fell ; for he realised, as she failed to do, that Mr. Overstone’s advent implied the extinction of that nascent interest which Esther had awakened in his heart. “It is a great bore,” he muttered ; “and now Lydyiard will expect me to go away with him.”

Esther turned indoors to complete her preparations for breakfast. George watched his friend, as, after parting with Mr. Overstone, he led the

saddle-horse towards the pilot station. Presently Mr. Overstone reappeared with the two nags, from which a pair of black boys had been dismounted, and the proposed arrangements were explained to Brand, who, when he heard that Esther was to be of the party, joyfully acquiesced in the plan.

Mr. Overstone unhesitatingly accepted Esther's proffer of a cup of tea. It was his favourite beverage, and he contrived to make a tolerable breakfast of kippered herrings, exhibited in their tin, at which Brand's more fastidious stomach revolted.

No mention was made of Hagart; by tacit consent his name seemed a subject to avoid. Mr. Overstone was not an observant man, but his attention was keenly alive to anything which bore upon his particular hobbies, and blemishes upon the skin being in his philosophy of cause and effect solely referable to an absence of salt in the system, his wandering blue eyes did not fail to remark the red and blue bruise upon Esther's brow. "Lord, child!" he exclaimed, "you are getting an eruption. What is that mark upon your forehead?"

Esther cast an expressive glance at Brand, but made no reply.

"Now that's the way with gells," sputtered

Mr. Overstone; "they don't mind what their elders say to them. I have always told you, Esther, that what makes you so weedy is the not taking salt enough with your food. You never see my wife or children with pimples upon their bodies. When did you first notice that?"

"It's not a spot, Mr. Overstone," faltered Esther; "at least, not a pimple. I knocked myself—that is—I was thrown against the door."

"Your father did it, I suppose, when he was drunk," said Mr. Overstone, with a blunt appreciation of facts. "Well, I'm glad that I brought Cavalier saddled for you. It was the mistress's idea. She said that you had not been over for some time. Old black Poll has taken to the bush again—it's always the way with those gins; you can't civilise 'em—and the children are more than Mrs. Overstone can manage comfortably, with the jam-making, and one thing and another. You had best ride back with me, Esther. I'm all for gells doing their duty, myself, but no one can expect them to stop with fathers who get drunk, and bang their heads about—so put up your swag, and the pack-bags can stop here till one of the black boys can fetch them."

“Good morning, Muster Overstone,” said Bride, stepping on to the verandah; “we shall be glad of the meat you’ve brought. I’m precious sick of goats’ flesh myself, though it’s a sight nicer than the measly pork I’ve had to stomach in my time. There’s a deal in use. Have you brought Cavalier over for Miss Esther, sir?”

“The horse is there for her,” said Mr. Overstone, “if she likes to come back with me.”

“We’ve run out of grog,” said Joe significantly, “and Esther’s head was knocked agen the lock of the door last night. She had better go with you, Muster Overstone, and I’ll let her know when to come back. Have you seen Hagart this morning, sir? He is mooning somewhere about the beach.”

“No,” replied Mr. Overstone; “I rode over straight from the Wattle-tree camp. Now, Esther, look sharp over your swag, for I must be at the yards before the mob of cattle I have drafted, get there.”

“I’ll send the old woman to wash up for you, Esther,” said Joe, “and you’ll have no call to trouble about your father; he won’t want much cooking for, when the drink is upon him, and a little extra work will be good for Nancy. She’s getting dropsical for lack of running about. It’s

the way with women—of a sort—when they're idle."

Brand seized the opportunity, when Mr. Overstone was expatiating to Lydyiard upon the excellence of his method of curing beef, to whisper in Esther's ear, "Ah! that is right: you'll come, won't you? It will be such a relief—such a happiness to me."

Esther went into her room to make her simple preparations for the visit. In less than an hour they were all ready to start, their valises strapped on to their saddles, and Joe Bride receiving final directions about the portmanteaux, while Nancy made an ostentatious parade of her good nature, by clattering about among the breakfast things. Mr. Overstone paused with his foot in the stirrup to remark, "Now there's a thing I had almost forgotten. Ef you want to send news anywhere, gentlemen, you had better telegraph while we are here. Now there's Cleaver, Mr. Lydyiard! Suppose you were to let him know that I was taking you to Bully Wallah—it might settle his mind. Cleaver knows my principles, and he is strong on errigation."

"Thank you," replied Mr. Lydyiard; "but I think that it is hardly necessary at present. I had better defer communicating with Mr. Cleaver, till I have seen the land and digested the pamphlets."

“It is a capital idea,” exclaimed Brand, who had the weakness of self-importance in desiring to flash intelligence of his movements to all those whom they might concern. “I’ll just let Legard know where I’m to be found. Can any one give me a telegraph-form?”

“Here, sir,” said Esther; and entering the operating-room, she transmitted, after Brand had written it, the following message: “From George Brand, Pilot Station, Mundoolan Island. To Colonel Legard, Barracks, Sydney. Address as above. If necessary, please wire.”

The party mounted and rode off, Mr. Lydyiard accompanying his host in advance, George and Esther following behind. It was nearly midday by the time they had started, and the heat was extreme. Leaving the cape behind, and gradually losing sight of the sea as the promontory widened, they rode towards the centre of the island. Brand, a capital horseman, was in high spirits, and though there was much to be desired in the matter of his mount, he found a keen pleasure in jumping the logs and small gullies that lay near his path, then would wheel round, with a smile of triumph upon his handsome face, and meet complacently Esther’s shy admiring eyes; he was always disposed to be on the best of terms with himself and his performances. Esther was very

happy, and in spite of the misery she had left behind, and a characteristic tendency to depression, experienced that exaltation of spirit and crisp pleasure in the mere consciousness of living, that is so natural to the young. She had often ridden along the same path, but it had always been in the wake of Mr. Overstone, who had lumbered on ahead, only turning to point out a remarkable beast, or to comment upon the consumption of rock salt on the camps—subjects which had totally failed to arouse the girl's interest. Now she had companionship of the opposite sex, of an age near her own—and that, granted that it be of a congenial nature, is the greatest happiness that can befall us human creatures. If we look back upon a landscape which is connected in our minds with an ebullition of pleasurable emotion, we shall find that there is always a central figure animating the scene, and that we have not viewed it entirely through the medium of individual consciousness ; for I doubt if the finest panorama in the world would dwell long in our memories, if it had been gazed upon alone.

Upon this occasion there was nothing particularly inspiring in nature ; only the warm buzzing of myriads of insects in the air around, the winging of butterflies, and scent of wattle blossom, the crackling of dry twigs beneath the

horses' feet, and the vast solitude of forest aisles, on the ground of which there danced a mosaic pattern of shadow and brightness, as the sun cast broken rays through the bower of quivering leaves overhead. Occasionally they came upon a group of cattle lazily feeding among the brown straight trunks of the gum-trees, or a herd of kangaroo looking towards the intruders with fawn-like startled eyes, and graceful movements of alarm, ere they scampered through the trees, followed by the dogs in full cry. Now a scaly iguana would scuttle up a neighbouring tree-trunk, making a rustling in the tall blady grass, or a tawny native dog would slink into the shadow of a belt of scrub—and this for miles and miles, unvaried by the sight of a human habitation or mark of civilisation.

“How strange it seems, Esther,” said Brand, as they rode side by side through the leafy alleys, “to think of your growing up in this wild place among a set of rough sailors, without any society, or schooling, or that sort of thing which comes naturally to other girls. I thought all young women had to go through a course of drilling before they could even hold up their heads, or walk properly. People in England would stare if they were told how you lived. Now I have a cousin, who is, I should think, a little older than

you are. A regular jolly girl, and up to any larks;—but Lord bless you! she has been to Paris to learn French, and to Germany for German, and she has had no end of governesses and professors for music and drawing, and a French lady's-maid to teach her how to dress."

Poor Esther blushed with an overwhelming sense of her own deficiencies, but George's next remark carried with it a little comfort. "But I don't think that she is as pretty, and she is certainly not as interesting as you, who have had none of her advantages. I suppose that you have never been to school, Esther?"

"No, sir;" and Esther felt that he must hate and despise her for her lack of feminine accomplishments.

"Well," said George magnificently, "I don't care about your awfully clever women. They are great bores, I think, and I know lots of fellows who are of the same opinion. One does not want to be talked to by a woman about art, and the sciences, and 'ologies. Not that my cousin Lina goes in for that sort of thing. She used to make tremendous fun of me when I was cramming for my Army Exam. If I wanted a wife, Esther, I should only care for her to be sweet and sympathetic, and to look pretty, and to be very fond of me."

“But you would like her to be more than that,” said Esther, who, in spite of her childishness and ignorance, had already been visited by certain dim notions concerning the capabilities, and possible vocation of womanhood. All the princesses of her imagination had wistful yearnings after a higher phase of existence than that which they knew. She had once read a child’s version of the story of *Undine*, and had thought it too beautiful not to be true. “It would be growing like a plant,” continued Esther, dreamily. “Plants are lovely too, but they only want water, and earth, and sun. They cannot move or think. That is not what I should like to be. Oh, I think it is cruel not to let girls be what they wish—not to teach them, when they would give almost anything to learn!”

“You want to be educated,” said Brand, looking at her with an admiring wonder, “like other women—like my cousin.”

“There is no use in wishing. How can I learn? I must always go on like this.”

As George noticed the quickening sensibility of her face, the dewy brightness of her moistened eyes, he could not help thinking to himself, that the heart of man could demand no more from Esther than that she should always look thus.

Juan did not wish more from Haidée than that she should be beautiful. "I would not have you altered," he said, with the quick sympathy which he would have expressed towards a pretty child, whom he saw crying for something which he did not consider in itself particularly desirable. "But I am very sorry that you should not do what you wish, and if I could help you——Isn't there any one who would teach you?"

"No," replied Esther, sadly. "My mother taught me till she died; but I don't think that she cared very much for books, we never seemed to have any. I am not *quite* ignorant, but the little I have learned makes me long to know more; and I have read all the books at home and at Bully Wallah."

"If I were to get you some more," exclaimed Brand eagerly, "would that please you?" Then, answered by her gleam of childish joy, "I will do that; I am sure that there must be a way. It is always so easy to get books. You'd like novels and poetry—girls always do. There are some novels I like, but they're not womanish ones, and—I don't know whether they'd quite do for you, you wouldn't understand some things in them; but I think I am fond of poetry, good swinging rhymes that make a fellow want to fight—or to ride—or do something. I'll tell you

what would be our best plan. Mr. Lydyiard is so clever that he would be sure to know what would be best for you to read—we'll get him to make out a list, and we'll send it to Frazer-ville if Mr. Overstone will tell us how."

"Mr. Lydyiard looks as though he had so much to think about," said Esther doubtfully. "He might not like to be troubled."

"Oh, he would not mind; he is a very good-natured fellow. Tell me some of the books you like."

"I like all kinds," said Esther, brightening into enthusiasm, "except Mr. Overstone's pamphlets, and books about cattle; but there are some nice ones at Bully Wallah—stories, and history; *Ivanhoe*, and *The Abbot*. Do you know *The Abbot*? Queen Mary is in it, and Douglas. Oh, it was wicked to treat her so! And then there are some child's books and fairy stories—only, I daresay it is very foolish, but I never can be quite sure which are true; and Sir Walter Scott's poems. I read *Marmion* the last time I was with Mrs. Overstone."

"That's not bad," said Brand, pleased to exhibit his acquaintance with literature, which in truth was far from extensive; and he began quoting, winding up with a tender glance of admiration at Esther.

“ ‘Nought say I here of sister Clare,
Save this, that she was young and fair,
As yet a novice unprofessed ;
Lovely and gentle, but distressed.’ ”

“ Yes,” cried Esther, excitedly taking up the words ; and then the two capped verses for a few moments, like a pair of romantic school children ; and Esther—truly experiences were crowding upon her—fancied that she was tasting the joy of intellectual companionship, which is, to some women’s minds, the highest kind of happiness.

“ I think,” she began with shy confidence, her timidity diminishing before the flow of thoughts which, now that she had found a sympathetic listener, she was longing to utter. “ I think that I should like to make stories. It would be so delightful to live in other people’s lives, if they were real, it would be so much the more interesting, and if not, one could fancy they might all be true. I was so sorry when I began to grow old, and Joe Bride scolded me for caring about dolls. They all got broken, and no one would buy me any more, and since that time I have had nothing but the sea-shore, and the saw-pit——”

She stopped short, seeing the shadow of a smile upon her companion’s face. Perhaps even he did not understand.

“Go on,” said Brand, who was really amused ;
“I like to hear you. Tell me about the saw-pit.”

“It is a pit ever so old. I think it was used by the carpenters who built the huts at the pilot station before we came to it. It is full of soft saw-dust, and there are great logs placed across it, so that one can walk backwards and forwards ; and there are wattle trees, and creepers and ferns, growing round it. It is a perfect place to build houses, and the people who live in them are blue-bells turned upside down, and the little pink sprouts from the ends of the tea-tree boughs.”

“But what sort of people are they ?” asked Brand, bewildered yet interested.

“People who had stories of their own, and they went on and on and on, and every day it was different. No one ever went there but me, for mother could not walk so far ; and when I told her about the saw-pit, she grew sad, and said that a dream-world was a bad place for a woman to live in. And then she died, and a storm swept everything away. And now I don’t often go there, for father might be angry if I was away and he wanted me.”

“Esther,” asked Brand, “does your father often beat you ?”

“Not always, sir ; only when he is drunk.”

“But is he ever sober ?” asked Brand.

“Sometimes,” replied Esther. “Sometimes he does not touch spirits for a week at a time—but,” she added, with an effort at repression, “mother used to tell me not to talk to strangers about my father.”

“But I am not a stranger,” said George, persuasively ; “we decided yesterday that we would be friends, and friends tell each other everything, and I know that he struck you the other night. It is horrible to think of. Are you never afraid, Esther, that he will harm you seriously ?”

“I used to be afraid, sir. Once I ran away. It was then that I saw my mother—the only time since she died ; I sometimes think that perhaps I dreamed it. After that I did not mind so much.”

“But what had that to do with it ?” asked Brand, “and where did you run ?”

“Into the bush. I thought that he would kill me perhaps, and I was so frightened that I forgot that my mother had told me never to go away from him. I ran on till I came to the scrub. I felt sure that he would never find me there.”

“Was it this scrub ?” asked Brand, pointing to a dark wooded belt beside which they were riding.

“We must be near Bully Wallah now, sir. I daresay it is ; Mr. Overstone says it runs almost the whole length of the island, and the cattle sometimes get strangled by the creepers. I remembered all that he had said when I was there, and I recollected too about the boa constrictors in the jungle ; I have found out since that there are none in Australia. Oh, it is a horrible place to be lost in.”

“What is it like, Esther ?”

“It is so dark that one cannot see the sky through the leaves. The branches are twisted, and the creepers twine round them, and hang like long snakes. As dusk comes on, the dead trunks seem to be skeletons, and the bottle trees are like women in white dresses. When it was night I lay down upon a bank and tried to sleep, but there were curious noises all round me. Curlews were screeching, and creeping things seemed to be crawling on every side of me, and the native dogs howled till I thought they must want to eat me. I don't think that I ever felt so frightened in my life ; and then my mother came and stood beside me. That is why I think that the dead *may* come back, but it was only that one time. I have heard her, but I have never seen her since.”

“You were delirious, child !”

Esther shook her head.

"Well, what happened then?"

"In the morning, Mr. Overstone, who was looking for some stray cattle, found me and took me to Bully Wallah."

"Here they paused at a sliprail. Dismounting heavily, Mr. Overstone let it down for the rest to pass through, and then cracked his stock-whip, making it echo through the forest with a reverberating noise, after which he uttered two shrill, prolonged coo-ees."

"That is, to let the missus know that I'm coming—two coo-ees means that there's somebody with me. We don't often have visitors, and we never expect 'em except when the Narrows are crossable, and that's only twice in the month. My missus is generally prepared, but two coo-ees means that there'll be something extra wanted to eat, and it prevents 'em keeping a hungry stomach waiting. Now, Mr. Lydyiard, ef you have never seen a cattle station before, I am pleased and proud to say that I can show you a first-rate specimen. You won't find many places to beat Bully Wallah up north. I don't say anything about the Darling Downs. Squatters there can afford to have gates instead of sliprails, but I'll bet my best hat, that even there you won't find a manager like my old woman. Now

that's a thing," continued Mr. Overstone in his ruminative way, as they trotted noiselessly over a swampy piece of ground, "that's a thing that settlers don't consider as they ought. Bone and muscle and common sense—these are the points to be looked out for in a wife. It's like expecting land to yield good crops without irrigation, or cattle, or human beings to be healthy without salt, when a man thinks to find his home made comfortable by a weedy, sickly creature, that hasn't a thought except for novels and fallals."

Esther and George glanced at each other.

"A good, hard-working, managing wife. Now that's a blessing to thank Providence for, when you've got it."

The enunciation of this pious sentiment brought the riders within sight of the cattle station.

CHAPTER VI.

“ SOUL CANNOT MARCH TO THE BLEATING OF SHEEP
OR LOWING OF CATTLE.”

BULLY WALLAH head station, was, as Mr. Overstone had proudly affirmed, a very good specimen of its kind. There are stations in Australia, which, for beauty and commodiousness, might rival many English country houses ; but these are few and far between, and belong for the most part to wealthy sheep-owners, who have been educated in Europe to the amenities of civilisation. As a rule, house-building and house-keeping are conducted upon a rough-and-ready fashion ; utility considered before the picturesque, and abundance without regard to quality. It is surprising that with so many natural advantages, so bald a result should be produced. What, for instance, could be more easy of accomplishment than a prettily-laid-out garden, in a climate where there is a nominal winter, and where

vegetation flourishes with an almost tropical luxuriance? But, while there are spare hands nearly always loafing about a station, and a little trouble in watering is almost all that is necessary, vegetables and flowers usually grow promiscuously, and a rectangular enclosure laid out in unshaded patches, is generally the only attempt at ornamental landscape.

So within doors; a pretty wall-paper, a flowered cottage chintz, a few well-chosen engravings, a little crewel work and abundance of books and periodicals, and a dainty arrangement of brackets and gipsy tables, would require but a small outlay and some exercise of taste; but in most cases the drawing-room is a stiff, barely furnished, unrefined apartment; and the verandah, encumbered with saddlery, and haunted by dogs, is the living-room of the family.

The Overstones' house was a low bungalow-like eight-roomed cottage, with slab walls—whose gaping apertures happily were not of consequence in a climate where the thermometer rarely ranges below 60°—and surrounded by a ten-foot verandah, the posts of which were twined with creeping jasmine, bougainvillea and stephanotis. The sunny side of the house was entirely screened by a leafy grape-vine, which threw quivering shadows upon the boards, and was hung with

purpling fruit. Two little children were playing about the log steps leading into the garden, and a number of dogs, who had been lying in the shade, rose and stretched themselves at the sound of their master's voice, all on the alert for his appearance. In front of the house a pretty garden, well stocked with fruit-trees, was laid out in long vine-trellised walks; upon one side was a clump of orange-trees, upon the other a small plantation of bananas. In front of the verandah, two bamboos made a perpetual rustling of their reed-like stems and spiky leaves; and above all was a clear blue sky just flecked with grey clouds, and in the distance of the mainland, a line of shadow-covered hills. The entrance behind—for all Australian bush houses are approached in the rear—led into a yard, crossed by a long covered passage, which communicated with the detached kitchen. The dwelling was surrounded by outbuildings, bark roofed and of questionable perpendicularity. Against the doorpost of one of these huts a black gin, clad in a tattered gown, and with a red handkerchief bound round her woolly locks, squatted over the shredding of a basin of peas, while two naked picaninnies fought for the possession of their mother's pipe, which, in obedience to Mrs. Overstone's orders, had for the time been laid aside. She looked

up and uttered a prolonged "yah" as her master and his friends rode into the yard.

"Come, my gell," said Mr. Overstone to Esther. "The missus is in the front, I expect. This way, gentlemen."

Preceding his guests, he marched through the sitting-room, an apartment scrupulously neat—for Mrs. Overstone prided herself upon the whiteness of her boards and the purity of her holland covers and antimacassars—into the verandah, where the mistress of the house, surrounded by her children, was bending at work over her sewing-machine.

"Well, Gritty," said Mr. Overstone, when he had kissed her with a hearty smack, and had performed the necessary introductions; "and how has everything been going on while I have been away?"

Mrs. Overstone ran her thumb down the seam she had been stitching, before replying. She never sputtered, or talked in an interjectional manner like her husband, but was always stolidly composed; speaking, when she did speak, in an even, guttural tone, with more than usual of the colonial drawl.

"The strawberry cow has calved, Andrew; and there were twenty young heifers branded yesterday; I was careful to put the numbers down.

You'll find the paper on the office-table. There was a nice shower the night before last, which has brought on the cultivation paddock beautifully."

"Now that's a thing—" began Mr. Overstone, "I'll explain it by and by, Gritty. It's to be done away with ef the settlers come ; except—" he added, "that it's an example for errigation."

"It would be a pity to do away with the cultivation paddock," said Mrs. Overstone, placidly. "Pumpkins grow so nicely in the maize, and you're so fond of pumpkin pie; Andrew, especially when it has a little lemon in it. Smuggler, the black boy, must have brought some grog from Frazerville when he fetched the mail, for both he and black Sally were drunk yesterday. I was obliged to lock them up in the meat-store."

"Sperrits!" cried Mr. Overstone. "Now I'll give it to Smuggler for that. Now that's one of my principles, Mr. Lydyiard! I don't allow grog among my hands—never drink it myself—but I always have a glass of good whisky for my friends. When you want it, you'll find it in the left hand corner of the cellaret. Don't wait to be asked, Mr. Brand ; but it's a bad thing—a very bad thing for young men. I'll go and talk to Smuggler, Gritty. You see, Mr. Lydyiard, I'm obliged to keep order on my station—order, you know, a place is nothing without order—the

log written up every day—the numbers of the stock always put down—and the books kept by double entry. Gritty, you'll see that the bachelor's room is ready for these gentlemen."

"I am never taken unawares, Andrew," said Mrs. Overstone, sublimely. "The beds are made, and there's water and towels all ready. You'll find the whisky and cold tea on the side-board, and a tongue and a tart in the dining-room. It's a grape tart," she added, applying herself again to the sewing-machine, just pausing to say, "You'll sleep in the nursery, Esther; and you had better go and get your lunch now."

Rod, the little boy, looked up from his toys. "Bessie is a naughty girl—she tipped her tea over this morning. Is that Hullabaloo come to take her to his den?"

He pointed to Lydyiard, who smiled at the child. "You don't look so cross now," said Rod. "I thought you must be Hullabaloo, because you are so ugly—giants and wicked men are always ugly. The other chap is not ugly, I think he's Esther's sweetheart. I'm glad you're come, Esther. I have got a new book from Frazerville. Mother says you are to read it to me, and you are to put Bessie in her bath, and nurse baby. He's a very naughty baby—he cries. He'll have to have some nasty medicine—I take medicine sometimes.

Do you like medicine? I don't—but mother says it makes me good."

Mrs. Overstone certainly deserved her lord's praises, both in the matter of domestic management, and as regarded her qualifications of bone and muscle. Whatever mind she had, was exercised for her husband's comfort, and he had reason in boasting that there was no house in the district so well cared for as his own. Mrs. Overstone was great in the making of cakes and curing of hams. She concocted lemonade in the summer, and sugar-beer in winter, which were delectable to the thirsty palate; and her jams and marmalade were beyond praise. She also made her husband's shirts, and could even leather his breeches; and her own clothes, and those of her children, were fashioned by her industrious fingers. It was wonderful how she found time for these multifarious duties; for to her other acquirements, must be added an intimate knowledge of every horse that was employed upon the run, and of each herd of the Bully Wallah cattle. She was an excellent dairy-woman, had always fresh butter, and provided the luxury of clotted cream. Her hot scones melted in one's mouth, and her poultry were always in laying order. It will therefore be readily seen that Brand was likely to be in clover, both as regarded his creature

comforts, and those more subtle delights which it was in Esther's power to furnish.

In person Mrs. Overstone was tall and comely, with large bones well covered with firm ruddy flesh. She always wore print gowns in summer, and linseys in winter—made barely to touch the ground ; except on Sundays, when, after superintending the cooking of an unusually sumptuous dinner, she put on a trained black silk dress, with a collar of Nottingham lace, and a crimson necktie fastened with a large brooch containing a miniature of her husband.

There were three children : Roderick, Bessie, and the baby, who were handed over into Esther's keeping, with the intimation that she was expected to wash and feed them, and generally to preside over their play. Esther was not fond of children—few imaginative girls are. Little Bessie was mischievous, and the baby was fractious, but Rod was a quiet boy, who liked having stories read to him—and this was a very congenial occupation to Esther.

It was dry delicious weather, and there were always cool breezes blowing up from the sea, which tempered the usually oppressive heat of that time of the year. The children liked being out of doors, and to Esther, accustomed to the sterility of the pilot station, it was very pleasant

to sit beneath the vines, with their hanging clusters of purple and green, with the scent of roses and verbenas in the air round her, and the soft murmur of the dry leaves of the bamboos, as the stems swayed to and fro in the breeze. She would take the three little ones out of a morning, to a shady place under the clump of orange-trees of which the children were particularly fond; and there she would sit, the baby upon her knees lulled to sleep by the sound of birds and insects, while Rod and Bessie played among the flowers. There was a hammock slung between the trees, and in it Brand had a fancy for swinging himself, a cigar in his mouth, while he talked idly to Esther and the children. His conversation was principally about himself, but with this tendency Esther was not disposed to find fault; for she was quite ready to endorse his half-expressed opinion, that no finer fellow existed upon the earth.

Esther was on the confines of Arcadia, though she hardly realised the fact. There were delicious thrills of enjoyment, and soft echoes of poetry conveyed to her consciousness by the breath of the wind, the scent of the flowers, or something else, which she could not define to herself. Nature had never seemed so lovely before; but nature had never before reached her

soul through the same medium. Life seemed to be acquiring a fulness which it had always hitherto lacked. The unlovely and prosaic faded into dimness, and an atmosphere of vague delicious enjoyment seemed to surround her own immediate existence.

Mr. Overstone was at this time busy mustering his cattle, and used to start forth with his men, early in the morning, saluted by a tremendous clatter of barking of dogs and cracking of stock-whips, and did not return till late in the evening, when he almost always fell asleep over his tea. Lydyiard, anxious to see the country, and to make acquaintance with all phases of Australian life, rode with the party whenever a mount could be without difficulty supplied him; but Brand, after one day's work in the yards, returned disgusted to the house, and confided to Esther that "this sort of thing" suited him much better; "this sort of thing" meaning the hammock, a cigar, and admiring contemplation, at close quarters, of Esther's face, with an occasional interlude of eating of fruit. On the whole, he liked his quarters immensely, and was by no means anxious that Mr. Lydyiard should hasten his inspection of Bishop Medlicott's selection.

Lydyiard was not at all in good spirits. When he was not out on the run with Mr. Overstone,

he spent his days writing in a little back office, where the owner of Bully Wallah composed his pamphlets, and kept his ledgers "by double entry;" or wandered about the garden with a book, excusing his taciturnity upon the plea that his mind was greatly occupied. No one saw anything strange in this mental absorption; for Brand had thoroughly impressed the Overstone household with the belief that they were entertaining a great literary luminary. Lydyiard rarely spoke to Esther, though he watched her closely, but seemed fond of playing with little Bessie, whom he would make his companion in his perambulations of the garden, keeping her quiet for hours. He looked so depressed and solitary that Mr. Overstone's kind heart was troubled, and he remarked to his Gritty in their conjugal retirement: "It is a sad thing to see a man of Mr. Lydyiard's age without a wife or a child belonging to him. And a clever fellow, Gritty, who is always pleased to learn something he didn't know before. He's worth fifty Cleavers; for though Cleaver has always gone with me upon the salt question, I don't hold with him on other points—not but what every one has a right to his own opinion, whether it's bad or good, but I like a man who is willing to change it, when he sees that he's mistaken—

and who should have a sounder judgment upon cattle-farming and agriculture than I, who have proved all I say in the House?"

"Esther, you are looking a thousand times brighter than when you came here first," said Brand, one afternoon when they were sitting under the orange-trees. "This place suits you better than the pilot station. I like it uncommonly, and the cooking isn't half bad. I don't know that I was ever happier in my life. Go and get me a match, youngster, will you? I call the bush life a very jolly one. Suppose that I were to sell out of the army and turn squatter?"

"But you don't like the work, sir, and I am sure that it would not suit you," said Esther, mentally recoiling from the picture which imagination suggested, of Brand with his lithe figure garbed in moleskins and a Crimean shirt, coming up hot and grimy from the yards. "No, I am sure it would not suit you, sir."

"Perhaps you are right. No, I shouldn't like branding and squaretailing—they would make one's hands and clothes in such a beastly mess, and the army fits me down to the ground in some ways. As for Australia, it isn't half a bad place, and a long way from head-quarters, which is an advantage, when there's an old curmudgeon

like my uncle always bringing one to book. Still, taking it all round, nothing beats an English life for enjoyment. Should you like to go to England, Esther ?”

“It must be a beautiful place,” said Esther, wistfully. To her ignorant mind, England was a kind of earthly paradise, extremely difficult of attainment—a view of the old country not unusual with Australian youth. In the colonies, to say that a person is, or resembles an European, is to give him or her, brevet rank as a superior mortal.

“I should like to take you to England,” said Brand, reflecting on past delights, “and to show you the sights of London—the Row in June—the Opera on a command night—and Lord’s—and Hurlingham—and——”

“And the Tower, and Westminster Abbey,” exclaimed Esther.

“Oh, they’re all bosh. No one goes there but country cousins and cads ; but there are millions of other things. There’s the Academy, if you like pictures—and the boat-race—and Ascot. That’s a grand sight.”

“What is Ascot ?” breathed Esther.

George laughed. “It’s a racecourse. Many’s the pony I have lost there. But for real sport, if you are a crack shot, there’s nothing to beat a good pheasant battue.”

"What's that, sir?"

"A downright hot corner, with no end of birds flying over your head. 'Cock bird to you, sir,' and bang! there it goes—such a row as you never heard. There's hunting, too, but a fellow has to ride uncommon good horses to hold his own in Leicestershire. And four-in-hand, I have never had much chance of coaching—but I mean to go in for it some day."

"Esther," said Mrs. Overstone, appearing with a large basin of fruit in her hands, "you are doing nothing; and I see that baby is asleep; just peel this dish of peaches for me, and mind you don't throw any of the stones away, for they flavour the jam awful well when they're cracked. I'm hard at work over the kitchen fire."

"Shall I help you?" said Brand, picking out the ripest peach and commencing operations by eating it. "Mrs. Overstone's a capital cook, isn't she? She makes me very comfortable; but if I had a wife, I wouldn't allow her to stew over the kitchen fire. This puts me in mind of Grately, and of the time when I was a youngster, and the housekeeper used to let me pick strawberries for preserve. I should like you to see Grately, Esther. It would be an awfully jolly place if my uncle were not such an old miser, and kept it up properly; however, it will be mine some day."

"Will it, sir?" asked Esther, indifferently, her wide notions of landed property in Australia causing her to be less easily impressed by the dignity of ownership in England.

"When my uncle is dead," continued Brand; "that is, he may leave it away if he likes, for I am only his nephew by marriage; but he has brought me up as his heir. I shall never be Lord Coniston," added George, with a regretful sigh, "that's the worst of it; but it is a fine thing to be heir to a good property. I shall sell out of the army, and keep a string of hunters, and—marry, I suppose." Somehow the announcement sent a pang to Esther's heart.

"You are very slow," said George, presently; "this is my third to your one. To be sure, I have eaten them and you have peeled them." And then bending forward from the hammock, he fixed his handsome eyes upon Esther's face and added, "Should you mind my going away—and marrying—Esther?"

"I should be sorry," said Esther, too childish to hesitate at the admission, but she blushed as she made it. "I couldn't help being sorry, though it would be silly; for, of course, sir, you must go away, and our lives will be separated."

"Do you think so?" asked Brand. "I should be unhappy if I knew that would happen. I

could not bear to think that I was never going to see you again, Esther, but somehow, I have a feeling that our lives will not be divided. I don't know why, but I am almost certain of it."

"You will go away," murmured Esther, peeling her peach very briskly.

"I suppose that must be. My leave will be up, you know. But" (more cheerfully) "I don't see why I shouldn't come back again, unless we are recalled; there was a talk of our being sent home, but we won't think of that. You won't forget me, Esther?"

Just then Mr. Lydyiard came towards them carrying little Bessie in his arms. "Brand, Mr. Overstone has sent me to tell you that one of the black boys is going to Frazerville. If you have any letters to write, you had better do so at once."

"No," said Brand, "I never write when I can telegraph. It saves a world of bother, and useless wording; but, by Jove, I had almost forgotten! Lydyiard, sit down, like a good fellow. Esther is very fond of reading, and I want to get her some books. Can you think of the names of any that she would like, and I will write to a bookseller in Frazerville for them. She likes stories best—don't you, Esther?"

Mr. Lydyiard sat down as he was bidden, and

looked gravely at Esther, who was shy of having a favour asked on her behalf.

“Are you fond of reading, Esther?”

“I think I like it better than anything in the world, sir,” replied Esther, flushing with that quick glow that made her face so sympathetic.

“And story books?” continued Lydyiard; “life is often a fairy story to the young, and to the old it turns sometimes into a tragedy. You must not give too free a rein to your imagination,” he added, in a quiet, sad voice. “I can see that you are inclined to be romantic. It is a bad thing for a girl to imagine that all men and women are like those of whom she reads. When she grows older she is apt to fret, and to fancy that she might have done better with her life, and sometimes she tries to take her fate into her own hands, and wakes up, too late, to find that she has made a bitter mistake. Disappointment is hard to endure.”

“I should like to read of people who have lived,” said Esther. “Perhaps one might learn from them. It is better to know that things are true. I haven’t read very much, sir, and nothing but story books, but some of them were about real people.”

Lydyiard wrote down the titles of several biographies, male and female, and of a few works which he thought suitable to her age and

understanding. “If you are anxious to learn, we will talk over what you have read, and see how you can best improve yourself. I will give you some books, if you care to have them; and in the meantime Brand may send for these, since he wishes to do so.”

George went into the house with the slip of paper, and Lydyard remained with Esther while she peeled her peaches. “I think that your life is a dull one for a girl,” he said, “there does not seem to be much brightness in it from without. You should be intelligent. It would be well if you could cultivate your mind, as far as lies in your power, and learn to find happiness in yourself; but it must not be by reading novels and poetry—they might do harm to an undisciplined nature. Do you wish to improve yourself, Esther?”

“Oh! if I could,” said Esther, looking at him with great, earnest eyes. “If mother had lived she might have taught me; she did teach me a little, but I don’t think she cared as I do. She was always so sad, and often ailing. Oh, I feel—I feel” she cried, her eagerness overcoming her shyness, “that I could be different. If it were not for all the troubles—the brandy, the work, and the things that keep one down. It is like being outside a beautiful garden. There must be

something better and higher if one could only reach it, if only some one cared for me, and would teach me."

"You feel the need of love already! It is sad for a woman when she begins to experience that want. Better for her that she should not feel it too keenly! The longing for admiration is more easily satisfied than the longing for love. Try and repress it, Esther. I shall not be here very long, but I will help you as far as I can. And now I want to know something more of your life than you have told me."

He asked her several questions about her progress and general bent of mind, and in so doing led her on to talk of her mother. They made an interesting picture as they sat so, she with her heart in her eyes and the half-peeled peach in her hands earnestly regarding him; while he leaned forward, his hand shading his face, the sleeping child resting upon his other arm. He listened gravely, but scarcely made any comment, while Esther unconsciously revealed the heart-burnings, and agonies of disappointment and repentance of an ardent impulsive nature wearing itself out in the wretched struggle against moral weakness, and the deadly influence of drink, and clinging with despairing tenacity to the "honour rooted in dishonour" that was its only guide.

Esther did not know the entirety of the tragedy she was disclosing, or the depths of misery she was sounding in the heart of her listener. When little Bessie awoke with a cry, something in his way of soothing the child, and the tone in which he said, "Hush, little one, go to sleep again; *you* don't know what it is to suffer," startled her into observing his face more closely; and when she saw how pale and set it was, jumped to the conclusion that he must be in pain. "Oh, are you ill, sir?" she asked, with a gush of pity towards him. "Are you tired? I am afraid that I have tired you."

"No, Esther, I am not tired," he answered, still sadly. "But this little one is restless, and perhaps you had better take her to her mother, or put her to bed." He placed Bessie in her arms, and added, "By and by, Esther, when you are older, bear in mind that we have each of us a great responsibility upon us in regard to others, and that we cannot escape from it. Our mistakes, and failures, and selfish acts come back and haunt us when we are old. Nothing would matter much, if we had only ourselves and our own future to consult; but sometimes in trying to shape our own happiness, or what we think will be such, we recklessly involve that of others, when we have no right to do so. We bind them to us and

they cannot get release when they wish, except at the most severe cost."

Lydyiard spoke vaguely, as though he were referring to some painful experience in his own life of which Esther could have no knowledge. After a moment's pause, he continued—

"You will know by and by what I mean, and you will realise that every individual act involves in a greater or less degree some one else. It is the past, which, in spite of all our efforts and longings to escape from its thralldom, rules our lives till they are barely our own."

He walked away, leaving the child in Esther's arms, and she, confused by his words, yet hardly comprehending their meaning, carried Bessie and the dish of prepared peaches into the kitchen, where, in the large open fireplace, like a small room, Mrs. Overstone stood intent upon her preserving-pan.

CHAPTER VII.

A STORM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

A FORTNIGHT stretched in an elastic manner into three weeks. Mr. Overstone's mustering was delayed by the arrival of butchers from Frazerville, which prevented him from placing his time and his horses at Mr. Lydyiard's disposal, and Esther's foretaste of paradise suffered no interruption. The days passed as rapidly as a dream, and were to her full of the same pleasant enchantment. There comes a time later in life, when the soul craves more solid food than the unsubstantial sweetness of looks, and words, and lingering hand-clasps. There seems in love-making something higher to be longed for, than the mere pleasure of personal proximity, and it is not only the touch of hands or lips, the interchange of vows, and the superficial sympathy of young hearts, that is needed to satisfy the fulness of human nature, but a closer

and deeper communion of souls, the longing for which is often startling in its intensity.

Yet in spite of after yearnings, and the possibly almost complete realisation of a higher ideal, the glamour of a first attachment, is, to a young girl, rarely surpassed in after life. The freshness of early romance never comes back again, for in the case of the ordinary woman, it is certain that the purity of her sentiment will be alloyed by some prudential consideration. The plummy part of the cake may be more solidly satisfactory, but it has not the frothy, finely flavoured sweetness of the icing.

It has been asserted so often that the most enjoyable phase of courtship is that in which the love-making is tacit, and when as yet no positive declaration has been hazarded, that the remark has become a truism. Esther and George Brand were at this time in a position to verify it. Day by day the mutual understanding between them became closer. No words of actual love had passed between them, but there were swift shy looks, tender pressures of the fingers, and just sufficient consciousness of embarrassment in each other's society, to make each set the other apart from the rest of the circle, and to heighten the delight of being together. No one except Mr. Lydyiard took much notice of their

movements. Mr. Overstone was completely absorbed in his station business, and his wife in her jam-making and her needlework, and even had both been unemployed, it was improbable that their attention would have been attracted by anything as abstract as love-making. George was therefore at perfect liberty to lounge away his days in the society of Esther and the children. Mr. Overstone usually returned from his day's work on the run about dusk ; and, the evening meal over, the party would mostly adjourn to the verandah or grass plat ; and while Mrs. Overstone knitted endless winter petticoats or hose, her lord would either fall asleep over his pipe, or discourse eloquently upon cattle, agriculture, or Australian politics, untroubled by Lydyiard's silent acquiescence in his theories, and evident disinclination to discuss them. Then when Esther had put the children to bed, she would steal softly out and seat herself upon the edge of the verandah, with her feet upon the grassy slope, her slight white-clad figure supported by a post, and her head encircled by vine wreaths and drooping blossoms ; while Brand, with his cigar in his mouth, would lean against one of the pillars, and talk in a soft undertone, languidly plucking one by one the stephanotis flowers, and scattering the petals at her feet.

There was but a baby moon, and the dim light from the sitting-room was just sufficient to cast tender bewildering shadows, and to permit him to, now and then, surreptitiously press Esther's hand, or to gently brush her hair with his fingers; and poor Esther would thrill with pleasure at the contact, and with a touching economy, and prevision of the future, mentally treasure up the words as they fell from his lips—to feed upon when the source of intoxication should have departed. The soft languor of the southern summer night with its deep blue vault of sky and twinkling stars, its music of breeze and insects, and its heavy fragrance of tropical flowers, seemed eminently adapted to such dalliance; but though George had been many times tempted to kiss Esther, he had never yet ventured upon so decided a caress.

“George,” said Lydyiard to him one night, when they were smoking together in the verandah after the rest had gone to bed; “I warned you when we first landed upon the island not to arouse expectations in Esther's mind which it would be impossible for you to fulfil, but the warning seems to have had very little effect upon your conduct.”

“Expectations!” exclaimed George, derisively. “Bless the child! she would not know what the

word meant. Why, she is a perfect baby, and has not an idea beyond the mere pleasure of my companionship. It would be insulting her innocence to suppose that she had any thoughts of marriage or such like nonsense. Poor little thing ! Do you notice how she has improved, Lydyiard ? her eyes have a new light, and her face has lost that hopeless look it had when we arrived. Her life is so wretched that it would be hard indeed to grudge her the little happiness that my society has brought into it."

"I don't grudge it," said Lydyiard softly ; "who would grudge a motherless girl any joy ? I pity her far more than you can do. I pity all children who by the laws of nature can inherit nothing but evil from their parents. I pity Esther tenfold, because I see in her the workings of a nobler disposition than one could reasonably expect to find in one brought up as she has been ; but remember, my boy, the little happiness which you bring into her life now may lead to a worse sorrow than any she has yet known. Esther has been solitary since her childhood. She is yearning for sympathy and love. She may fancy that she has found it, and, without having analysed her feelings, may already have unconsciously given you her heart ; while you, who have no serious intentions beyond

the wish to amuse yourself, may blight her life instead of making it happier. Don't you see, George ?”

“Poor little creature !” said George, by no means ill-pleased at the tribute to his vanity conveyed in the suggestion that he was capable of inspiring an irrevocable attachment. “She is a sweet, beautiful child, and I am very fond of her, but of course, anything of that sort would be quite out of the question. Imagine Uncle Coniston's horror at the bare thought ! If that is what you are thinking of, Lydyiard, I will try and be careful. I won't talk to Esther more than I can help, or make love to her in any way ; but upon my honour I haven't said a word that she could construe into—I haven't kissed her, or done anything very spoony ; I assure you that I haven't.”

In pursuance of this vaguely framed resolve, Brand the next day accompanied Mr. Overstone to the yard, to assist at the final counting of the cattle that were to be delivered to the butchers that afternoon, and Esther spent the morning alone in the garden with the children.

“Esther,” said Rod, “you haven't got your sweetheart this morning, and I don't like you by yourself—you ain't jolly at all. I don't want to sit still, I want you to play at horses ; and I

don't believe you've got a headache ; you're only shamming because you are cross, and if you go into bad tempers you'll go to hell—mother says so."

Rod was teasing, and the baby was fractious, and Bessie would not be amused, but cried for the ugly man who played with her. Altogether Esther had not a pleasant time, and though the day was bright, and the flowers just as sweet as ever, everything seemed more or less blank. Even the book she tried to read carried with it no power of absorption. Could it be George's presence that made the difference ? and if so, what would life be worth when he was gone ? The dulness of negation was more endurable than this keen regret after a transitory Elysium. From where she sat in the garden she could hear the din in the stockyards, and tried to distinguish *his* voice above the others, but that was impossible. Why had he gone ? He did not like the work—he had said so ; would it not have been much pleasanter to sit under the shade of the orange-trees with her ?

She blushed and trembled, by her look awakening in his mind a delightful consciousness of the gap his absence had created, when, hot, and a little cross and disgusted, he returned at luncheon time from the yards.

“Will you get me some lemonade, Esther?” he said, “that’s awfully jolly stuff that Mrs. Overstone makes; I’m so thirsty; and those yards are so infernally dusty. I was wishing myself back the whole time, and thinking how deliciously cool you must be in the garden among the grapevines.”

She did as he asked her; and when he had swallowed a large draught of lemonade, tintured with brandy—it was a concoction in which Mrs. Overstone surpassed herself—Brand felt more contented with the bush generally.

“I wish that I always had you near me to wait upon me,” said Brand, with an ardent look; and Esther blushed again, and appeared to him ten times prettier. “I wish that you could always be with me,” repeated George, with a more tender emphasis upon the words; and being alone with her in the sitting-room, he ventured to take her hand and press it gently to his heart. She thrilled as she felt its rapid beating. No gesture could have been more tender or more respectful; and Esther felt herself transported to Arcadia again. George would have carried her fingers to his lips, but there was a sound of steps in the yard, and he dropped Esther’s hand suddenly, as Mr. Overstone’s loud voice became audible just outside the door.

“One of the finest herds of cattle I ever sold. Now it’s a sin to think of killing that B. J. bullock—he ought to be exhibited. Salt, sir. There’s nothing like salt for improving the quality of the blood, and *that* helps to put on fat. You’ll take a glass of whisky, Mr. Tyler? I won’t join you, for it’s against my principles to drink sperrits, but help yourselves; and directly after luncheon we’ll start down to the Narrows. The tide turns about three o’clock. Esther, my gell, you’ve had no fun this time at Bully Wallah—no riding about the country, or galloping after kangaroo. Suppose you and the missus were to come down to the Narrows and see the crossing. Two hundred head of fat bullocks all swimming together. Now that’s a thing—a sight, you don’t get every day. You had better ride down, Mr. Brand.”

“Thank you, I will certainly do so,” said Brand, all alive after the sport; “I never saw such a lot of animals together in my life; and if one gets away we’ll give it chase. It’ll be rare fun.”

“It’s very hot to-day,” said Mr. Overstone, fanning himself with his red silk pocket-handkerchief, while the perspiration stood in beads upon his brow; “there’s nothing like working in the yards for making a man sweat, but it’s

healthy they say. I'll take a cup of cold tea, Esther, and then I think I'll have a snooze till lunch is ready. I expect there'll be a thunder-storm this evening, and a good thing too, for there are bush fires about."

A little after two o'clock the party had mounted, and were riding through the bush to the Narrows, where the cattle had been sent on earlier, in order to be ready for the crossing at low tide.

The pace was necessarily slow, for the day was sultry, and the horses dripped with the mere exertion of a drowsy canter. The air was full of smoke, and heavy with threatening thunder; and the bush fires seemed to be gaining ground, for there was a lurid haze low upon the horizon; and Mrs. Overstone glanced anxiously at the sky and then towards the paddock fences, hoping in devout tones that "it might rain ere long," and keep the latter from injury.

"Oh! I hope not till we get home," murmured Esther, looking pale and frightened; "I am always so terrified in a storm."

"I will take care of you," whispered Brand, with rash self-assertion; "but it won't rain. See, the clouds are brightening already."

Long before reaching the Narrows they heard the monotonous lowing of the herd, like the distant roar of an immense crowd. The tide

was at its lowest. Upon each side, beyond the mangrove-covered banks, there stretched a black expanse of mud, and in the centre ran a turgid stream about half a mile in width, across which the cattle would presently swim.

The two hundred beasts were huddled together in a yard close by the water's edge, and separated from it by a railing and gate, which latter was at a given signal thrown open, and the frightened animals driven through it into the water. Men on horseback were stationed at various points, to hinder the cattle from escaping back into the bush, and if one beast, maddened by terror, succeeded in darting away from the edge of the stream, he was swiftly pursued and rounded by the outriders. It was altogether an exciting scene, and Brand, entering eagerly into the sport, spurred his horse to each of these wild gallops; while Mrs. Overstone, hurried for the moment out of her usual phlegmatic condition, dashed about as frantically as the men; but Esther and Lydyard drew rein beneath a tree upon the bank, and contented themselves with looking on at the proceedings.

The crossing occupied more than an hour. At one time, the narrow strip of sea seemed literally alive with men, horses, dogs, and cattle, all struggling together in the water. There was

such a plashing, as must have scared every shark from that particular part of the Narrows for many a day to come. The maddened beasts uttered infuriated cries, as the black boys, vociferating loudly in their native tongue, belaboured with their stock-whips those unruly kine who refused to face the shore ; and the dripping white men spurred their horses to more vigorous plunges, as they swam hither and thither in the effort to keep the herd together in a compact body.

At length, the last animal, steaming and heaving with fear and breathlessness, clambered up the opposite bank ; and Mr. Overstone, wet to the skin, with the salt water plashing from his cabbage-tree hat on to his saddle-bow, joined the party under the tree.

“ Andrew,” said Mrs. Overstone, “ while you have been crossing the cattle, the fire has crept on, and I’m afraid it’s near the paddock fences. Look ! ”

She pointed inland, and at the distance of two miles or so, they saw the flames rapidly advancing in an irregular tongue, sending forth thick clouds of smoke, licking up the tall dry grass that burned like so much tinder.

“ God Almighty ! ” cried Mr. Overstone, “ a brand new fence that cost sixty pound a mile to put up—a hundred and twenty pounds at

a go ! Now that's a thing——” But without waiting to finish his sentence, he put spurs to his horse, and darted off to a group of men who were riding slowly up from the crossing. His companions caught the words “Wire fencing,” “Free selectors,” floating back upon the breeze, and then saw him despatch with violent gesticulations the black boys to the front, to meet, and if possible arrest, the flames.

“How dark it is,” exclaimed George ; “why it must be nearly sundown.”

“No,” said Mrs. Overstone. “It's awful murky, but it's a storm brewing ; I doubt though, if it will come in time to save the fence—and there's a wind getting up. Don't be frightened, Esther, we must help to put out the fire ; and I have just remembered that the dairy window is left open, and the cream beneath it all ready for churning. It'll be spoiled to a certainty.”

“Come along,” cried Mr. Overstone. “There's no time to lose. You must all help to beat the fire. A brand new fence ! I can't afford to have more nor a hundred pound burned before my eyes. Follow me, Gritty. Brand, look after the gell ; I'm going to take you straight through the bush—and mind the trees. Ef I had looked which way the wind was blowing, the cattle might have gone to old Nick before I helped to cross 'em.”

Mr. Overstone took a lead straight across country in the direction of the fire, with his wife, an excellent horsewoman, at his heels. Lydyiard followed, and Brand spurred on his already tired horse, looking back every now and then to exhort Esther not to be frightened. It was a rough gallop through the bushes, over fallen logs, and across dry gullies, the branches of the trees scratching their faces, and the undergrowth tearing the ladies' habits. The day grew darker and heavier; in the distance there were angry growlings, while ahead, the sky looked lurid from the reflection of the fire, and banked up black behind in a wall of thundercloud and pent rain. The keen wind, which usually precedes a tropical storm, hurled along dry leaves, and rotten refuse of dead trees, and swept the flames faster and faster on towards the apparently doomed fence. Frightened cattle and scared kangaroos fled here and there for shelter, and snakes, lizards, and iguanas sought refuge in the trees; while the rank blady grass and dry timber that strewed the ground were like so much touchwood to the fire.

When the riders came within sight of the fence, the black boys and men whom Mr. Overstone had sent on before, were already hard at work beating with green boughs at the flames. Apparently, however, success depended more

upon the timely bursting of the storm, than upon any human efforts that could be made, for the fire was raging too fiercely for there to be any hope of quenching it.

Mr. Overstone threw his horse's bridle over a rail of the fence, and breaking off a huge wattle bough, joined with frenzied energy the other labourers. The rest of the party, women included, followed his example, and, branches in hand, rushed hither and thither amid the smoke.

"This way, Gritty," cried Mr. Overstone. "God bless the storm, ef it only hurries itself a bit."

They all beat upon the ground, presenting a curious spectacle, with the smoke enveloping their figures, and the flames playing upon their faces. The wind increased, and darkness gathered deeper behind, while lightning-flashes every now and then streaked the blackness, and loud claps of thunder shook the earth.

"Oh, come on, can't you?" cried Mr. Overstone, furiously addressing the elements. "There's a post ablaze already, and ef you'd only pour instead of growling, you'd save a deal of damage."

As if in answer to his appeal, the drops descended larger and faster, and presently a heavy shower, spluttering upon the burning timber and grass, rendered further exertion unnecessary.

Mr. Overstone threw away his half charred bough and caught his horse, which, alarmed by the lightning, had broken away from the fence. "Now that was a close shave," he said, mopping his face with his great silk handkerchief. "Five minutes more would have seen the end of a good many pounds. Make haste, Gritty, and mount; I can hear the hail rattling, and I'll bet my hat it's going to be the worst storm we've had this summer! Down with the sliprails, Smuggler—we must ride straight on, and jump the fence on the other side; there's no time to go round. It's a stiffish 'un, but the horses will do it if you give 'em their heads."

Mounting in confusion, they all dashed helter skelter through the sliprails, and across the paddock, till the opposite fence was reached. It looked a stiff piece of timber, and not one of the riders would have taken it in cold blood earlier in the day, but it is wonderful what courage desperation infuses into both man and beast, and there was a dense sheet of hail pursuing them, of which any one of the stones would have stunned the most thick-headed of the party.

All got over safely except Esther, who was last, and whose horse, unmanageable from terror, budged at the rails. Several precious moments

were lost, and the others were galloping madly towards the house, now quite close. "Oh, what shall I do?" shrieked the girl; "I can't jump it—I shall be killed."

Lydyiard heard the cry, and would have turned to her assistance, but his horse had the bit in its teeth, and the rider was powerless. Brand heard it too, and suffered a momentary pang of shame for having forgotten Esther in the thought of his own safety. He turned, saw the girl's agonised face, and putting his own horse again at the fence, struck Cavalier a sharp cut with his whip, and goaded the frightened beast to the leap. A moment after they had both achieved it, a tree struck by lightning fell almost in their path. Esther shrieked again, and Brand, uttering a hurried ejaculation of reassurance, seized her bridle. As the first ball of hail struck with a tremendous clatter the tin roofing of a cart shed, they gained the shelter of the yard.

The others had already dismounted and had disappeared within the house, except Lydyiard, who lingered to assure himself of Esther's safety. George, throwing himself from his horse's back on to the verandah, snatched Esther in his arms, and bore her into the first place of shelter that presented itself. This happened to be the little

back room used by Mr. Overstone as a study. It was quite dark except when transiently illuminated by the flashes of lightning, which revealed glimpses of a rough table strewn with ledgers, an uncarpeted floor, and a few rude chairs. The thunder cracked in volleys directly over the house; the hail pattered upon the roof, and the rain swept in under the eaves, and beneath the closed door.

“Oh, I am so frightened,” said Esther, clinging convulsively to George, as he held her up against him.

“Darling!” he murmured passionately, thrilled by the touch of the little wet hands against his neck.

He said not a word more while the fury of the storm lasted. They leaned trembling against each other, feeling security in the contact; more like a terrified boy and girl than a pair of lovers. Brand’s heart swelled with a curious joy at the feeling that he was protecting her. He held her waist, and clasped her to him, tingling all over as her hair brushed his cheek, while she yielded to the pressure, thrilling with a strange delight in spite of her terror. At every burst of thunder, or more vivid flash of lightning, their hands closed round each other spasmodically. It indicated no want of physical bravery that they trembled and

were awed. Esther had all the superstitious dread of thunder usual with a woman. George, who was in an ordinary way courageous enough in the presence of physical danger, became conscious of a hitherto unknown personality, and was frightened as much at the new self which seemed to have suddenly revealed itself to him in the midst of this fury of the elements, as at the storm itself.

Once, when Esther trembled violently, he kissed her on the lips. The caress set his nerves quivering and his heart throbbing, so that it was useless to think of yesterday's prudential resolves. It was all very well for an old ascetic like Lydyard to preach, but he—Brand—was young, and had warm lustily-flowing blood. . . . There was surely no harm in kissing Esther—all pretty women were meant to be kissed. How many rosy mouths had not his pressed ! and he had never thought anything of it, or reproached himself afterwards. Why should Esther be different to any one else ? What was there in the touch of her flesh that filled him with such bewildering sweet agitation ? Her cheeks were like velvet—and there was a soft dewiness upon her lips. He would do her no harm—but he could not help loving her.

The thoughts just flashed through his mind ;

he did not frame them into a process of mental reasoning, for he was trembling too; and he went on kissing her again and again.

Young love calmly written of by a third person appears trite and common-place; but there is a time when it seems to open the very portals of Elysium. Esther was like the butterfly, which, emerging from the chrysalis phase, first becomes conscious of a winged existence. She was giddy and tremulous with excitement.

They neither of them knew how long they stood thus together, or which of them moved first. They seemed to become simultaneously aware of the fact that the thunder was dying away into the distance, and the rain ceasing, and moved apart. Esther, her face covered with blushes, walked to the window. "It is getting lighter," she said; "the storm is going over."

George joined her, and they looked out upon a scene of desolation. Part of the roofing had been torn from the outhouses, branches of trees strewed the ground, and a portion of the fence had been blown down.

"We can never forget it," said Brand, in a low voice; "it's not only because it was terrible in itself, but—we can never be the same to one another again."

They seemed to turn by mutual impulse towards each other. "Esther," exclaimed George, hurried by his passionate longing into a declaration which he had never contemplated making; "Esther," he said, "I think that you are the sweetest and dearest woman I have ever known. I can't help loving you. I want you to belong to me—to go away with me by and by, and to live with me always. I want you to tell me that you prefer me to any one else in the world!"

"There *could* be no one else," murmured Esther.

He kissed her again. "And now you belong to me. It is more than being friends, though we were that from the beginning. I think that I loved you from the first moment I ever saw you. You were so childlike and confiding—so different to all other girls. You look prettier than ever now with that soft colour in your cheeks and the light in your eyes. Mousie—I shall call you Mousie, it seems to suit you—you'll never be lonely any more. Why are you blushing, darling? You need not be shy with me now."

"I ought to go in, sir, and change my wet things."

"Not just yet; and you must never call me 'sir' again. That was all very well before, but

now we are different. Call me George when we are alone. I won't let you go, Esther, till you give me something of your own accord. Can't you guess what it is?"

She put her hands up to his shoulders timidly, and then lifted herself and touched his face with her lips. A girl soon learns the lessons of love, but she was longing to get away, and to be alone with her new experience; she wanted to think over what had befallen her.

They had sat for a little while together when there were some calls outside for Esther, and as she was rising to go, the study-door opened, and Mr. Lydyard appeared. He saw at a glance that something had happened. "They are calling you, Esther," he said, quietly; "I am glad to see that you got in safely before the storm broke." And she escaped, but only to fall in with the Overstones, who were soothing the crying children, and lamenting over the disasters of the storm, while they tried to restore order in the establishment.

It was some time before Esther could snatch a few moments to herself; and then, as she stood in her own room, smiling and blushing to herself in her tender transport, the bell rang loudly for tea, and she had only time to change her wet clinging habit for dry garments, before the

children called her to cut their bread and butter.

“George,” said Lydyiard, when they were alone in the study; “you have broken your promise.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” answered George, in a defensive tone.

“Yes, you do. Last night you gave me to understand that you would alter your manner to Esther—that you would not try to engross her society—yet I find you shut up here with her alone.”

“That was an accident,” said George; “we took refuge in here from the storm.”

“The storm was at an end long before I entered; and I saw by her face that something had happened.”

“What should have happened?” asked George, evasively.

“You know best. What is it that has usually happened when a young man is found alone with a beautiful girl, in whom he has confessed to feeling a strong interest—when he looks ardent and confused, and when she is blushing and quivering as if with a new and delightful sensation?”

“How poetically you put it!” exclaimed George; “no one who heard you would take

you for the old misogynist that you are. You show an extraordinary interest in Esther," he went on, a little crossly. "I really believe that you are jealous; what can it matter to you whether or no she has a few foolish words said to her? Some fellow is bound to be spoony on her sooner or later—all girls go through the same sort of thing, and they are none the worse for it."

"You admit then that you have been making love to her?"

"I don't know what you call 'making love.' If you must have the truth, there is very little to tell. We were shut up in here while the storm was going on—by Jove, what an awful one it was!—and she was frightened—and I kissed her—and said something about being fond of her—that's all."

"You don't honestly think that will be *all*, George. What is to be the end of it?"

"I mean no harm—all fellows do the same. This isn't the first time you have taken that tone. Are you hinting that I want to be a scoundrel?"

Brand spoke angrily, but a flush overspread his face, and his heart began to beat unpleasantly at the suggestion which was conveyed in his own words. He had been carried away by his

impulses, and now that the question had arisen, he wondered what was to be the end of his love passage with Esther. What did she expect him to do? She could not seriously imagine that he would marry her. Perhaps she was not as innocent as she seemed. He had heard, or read, that girls in the colonies were full of precocity. Of course he did not mean any harm. Illicit connections were not new to him. He had "done wrong" in that way like every one else, but he had never—except in that early episode in his life, and the woman, if young, had been shameless—planned the ruin of a confiding girl.

He had not thought of the end of it. He could not marry Esther, he did not see how that would be possible; but if his passions got the better of him—after all, in that lawless country it would not matter much; but no—he was not bad enough to think of that—of course he meant no harm.

"No, I am not, George." Lydyiard's voice recalled him to himself. "I think that you are weak and easily led away, but I should be sorry to think evil of you."

No man likes to be called weak; it is almost as insulting as to be told that he is a coward.

Brand was subject to quick fits of anger, and he was considerably nettled now. "Look here,

Lydyiard ; what do you mean by talking to me like that ? I am as good a man as you, any day, and I won't be preached to as though I were a nincompoop. I don't want you to trouble yourself about my business. Nothing that passes between me and Esther can matter to you. Leave us to ourselves."

"Don't flatter yourself that I am concerned about you," retorted Lydyiard ; "it is of Esther that I am thinking. You are a man, and can bear disappointment, and I don't think that any amount of personal responsibility would give you a sleepless night—but Esther is different. There are women who will fling every consideration to the winds, and murder their own lives, and the lives of others, for the sake of a misplaced passion."

"What are you driving at ?" cried Brand ; "I have told you that I don't mean any harm. Who is talking of murdering Esther's life, or that of any one else ?"

"I know too," continued Lydyiard, "that a man may be haunted in after life, by an act committed in youth, when he was impulsive and hot-headed, and thought only of himself. He may have been carried away by the passion of the moment, into saying or doing that which has influenced the lives of others, and made them

bad or wretched. Don't you see, George? We can't live and bear alone the brunt of our mistakes and misdoings—others suffer through us. We must be members of the human brotherhood."

"I think that is rot," said Brand, who had no patience with abstract moralising. "If one spent one's life in considering other people, there would be no pleasure in living; and I have said that I mean no harm. A kiss more or less does not matter. It might, if the thing became really serious, but I will be careful. I *was* carried away this afternoon, but a fellow does not like to be told he is a fool, and a man can't go back all at once. I'm very fond of Esther; I don't think that I ever cared so much for a girl before."

"Do you mean," asked Lydyiard, "that you would marry her? If so, there are things—things you ought to be told—other considerations that you must weigh."

"If it came to that," said George, "there would be an infernal number of things to consider; I know that well enough, but I did not mean *that*. A fellow may be fond of a girl without wanting to make her his wife. It is a long leap from a kiss to marriage."

"I will warn her," said Lydyiard, shortly.

"You had better take my advice and do

nothing of the kind. What business is it of yours? I am not a baby, that I want some one to settle my private affairs for me. If there is to be interference, I will not answer for my conduct. Do you hear, Mr. Lydyiard?"

"Your leave will expire shortly," said Lydyiard, coldly.

"I could easily get it extended if I wished, and I will do so if you put your finger in the pie. I won't have any d—d meddling."

The bell summoned them to tea, and George hastily left the room to change his wet clothes before joining the rest of the party.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE GARDEN AT BULLY WALLAH.

ESTHER was sent early to bed that evening. The rain still fell in a continuous drizzle, and the storm had been followed by a keen wind, which swept boisterously round the house, making the slab walls crack and groan, and as it penetrated beneath the eaves, causing the stretched canvas ceilings to quiver and flap. Consequently the whole party was confined indoors, and a *tête-à-tête* between Esther and George was impracticable. Mrs. Overstone darned diligently, and her husband arranged with Mr. Lydyiard the programme of the morrow's proceedings. At last the mustering was at an end, and the station at liberty to devote itself to other than bovine business. It was settled that they were to take with them blankets and provisions, and to camp out for the night, in order to allow ample time for the inspection of Bishop Medlicott's land. This achieved,

Lydyiard's mission upon Mundoolan Island would for the present be practically accomplished ; but Mr. Overstone's views knew no limitations, and he was pressing upon his guest the expediency of delivering in England a series of lectures, founded upon the immortal pamphlets, and besought him to remain a little longer and " talk the matter over."

There was no ostensible reason why Brand should not accompany his friend and host. It would have appeared strange had he begged to remain at Bully Wallah ; he was therefore reluctantly obliged to pack up his swag, and to forego the present pleasure of amorous *tête-à-têtes* with Esther. She, on her side, was too happy to appreciate this privation ; indeed, she was glad to be alone, that she might dwell upon her new-found joy. She felt herself breathing a fresh and rarefied atmosphere, miles higher than the sublunary air which filled the nostrils of the other inhabitants of the island. When she walked, her feet seemed hardly to touch the ground, and all the time that she was tending the children, and listening to the morning and nightly prayers, her heart was singing to itself a pæan of thanksgiving. Some one loved her. She was to belong to some one. A fuller and more glorious life seemed to be opening before her. She felt herself thrilling with

hitherto undreamed-of capabilities, now that a motive power had been given her—now that this young demi-god had been sent to her to draw her upwards. “Oh, I do love him. He is so good. I do love him,” she whispered to herself, as she lay awake in her little bed in the nursery, with the children sleeping peacefully beside her, and Mrs. Overstone snoring plethorically through the partition at her head. It did not occur to Esther, that matrimonial felicity might, to some intelligences, take the form of stolid content with the lot decreed, and a still lower grovelling along the paths of life, as exemplified in the bearing of children and the making of jams. Marriage, as a practical consideration, had never entered into Esther’s thoughts of the future. It was a culmination which she had not as yet taken into account.

It is more interesting to dwell upon the flutterings of Esther’s maiden heart, than upon the geographic position and geologic strata of the site for the projected colony. The latter subjects in all their bearings occupied exclusively, however, the attention of Mr. Lydyiard; and during the two days spent in the expedition, he thoroughly examined every acre of the three thousand comprised in the scene of Bishop Medlicott’s abortive attempt at conversion, and

even drew up a map of its physical conformation and general characteristics, for the enlightenment of the intending colonists.

Emigration was one of Mr. Lydyiard's pet hobbies. He had studied the subject from the stand-point of political economy, had written and lectured upon it, and was bitten with the notion of educating the lower orders to a standard requisite for developing the resources of a new country. He was not visionary enough to believe in an impossible Utopia, but he had an indestructible faith in the capabilities of the human race, and an intense longing to elevate the moral tone of society by the inculcation of that "worship of humanity," a *cultus* so prevalent among the positivist thinkers of the age. England seemed a field of abuses, and the attention of political economists had not, he thought, sufficiently embraced the effectiveness of an improved system of emigration, as a remedy for existing evils. The task of remodelling an old form of society appeared hopeless in comparison with the effort of constructing a new, with elements more likely to result in approximate success; and to be a link in the chain of beneficial influence seemed to Lydyiard the noblest ambition for which to strive.

He liked the land. It promised many facilities for the carrying out of his scheme, and the fact of its isolation was to his mind a strong point in its favour. The ground seemed fertile, and was well watered. He discovered indications of coal, which suggested a future line of industry, and the immunity from frost was propitious to the cultivation of sugar and cotton—branches of agriculture which he wished to commend to the notice of the settlers. He mentally apportioned the land into lots of three hundred acres, and, before he quitted it, had resolved upon sending in his papers to the Queensland government, and upon returning to England as soon as he should have mastered the nicer details connected with free selection.

Mr. Overstone having begun to look upon the settlement almost as an origination of his own brain, was full of its prospects, and saw already, in the vista of the future, a flourishing port at the island, a miniature forest of masts, and daily transit of steamers, to be supplied with coal, of which he was certain there were extensive seams upon his own run. He was convinced that coal, in the abstract, was a thing to be taken up, that it had never been thoroughly considered, and as a mineral production of Australia, would never be worked

advantageously till he — Mr. Overstone — had elaborated views concerning it, and had proved them in the House.

Brand listened in apathetic silence. He cared nothing for Mr. Lydyiard's settlement, or for the benefits it promised to confer upon Australia. The probable discovery of coal-beds, or the successful cultivation of cotton, were matters of no importance to him. The vision of some people is bounded by their own consciousness, and Brand's mental perspective embraced at present only Esther and himself, and what immediately concerned them. The remainder of the universe held a very infinitesimal claim upon his consideration. He was trying to reconcile in his mind, expediency, morality, and inclination, and found, as others have done before him, the extreme difficulty of equalising the triangle. He was far from having succeeded, when, upon the evening of the third day, they returned to Bully Wallah.

Esther was sitting in a corner of the verandah, when the mens' voices sounded without in the yard. An overpowering shyness made her linger behind Mrs. Overstone, and tremble at the thought of meeting her lover's eyes. It was difficult at the moment to convince herself, that the scene in the study had been anything

but a dream, and that they would stand together no more upon the mutual ground they had occupied three days ago. During the meal which followed upon their arrival, Brand would persistently try to catch Esther's eye, or, beneath the corner of the table which separated them, to gain surreptitious possession of her hand. To a more experienced, or to a coarser-minded woman, this might have appeared vulgar importunity, but to Esther it was only bewildering and sweet.

"Come into the garden by and by," he whispered, as she left the room with the children; "steal round by the banana-trees, and I will join you in the arbour."

As soon as Rod and Bessie had said their little prayers, and the baby had been soothed into slumber, Esther softly quitted the nursery, to meet Brand in a little vine-trellised summer-house about ten paces from the end of the verandah, and concealed from it by an intervening thicket of bananas. She walked slowly, her maidenly instinct recoiling somewhat from this advance to the embraces of a lover; but George saw her white dress fluttering among the trees, and rushing towards her, took her eagerly into his arms, and pressed her to him, kissing her repeatedly, till Esther uttered her

faint protest. "Oh, Mr. Brand! oh, sir! indeed, you must not!"

"Don't be frightened, Mousie. There's no harm in my kissing you. You are mine now, remember, and I may do what I like with you. You don't feel sorry, darling, for what has happened?"

"No; oh, no!" murmured Esther, below her breath; "I have been so happy."

"So have I. At least, I should have been happy, if I had been with you, instead of riding round that beastly selection. And how the mosquitoes tucked into one! You did not miss me, then, Esther?"

"I think it was good to be alone," said Esther softly. "I liked to think over all that had happened, and to tell myself that it was quite, *quite* true."

"You sweet little thing. Did you think that you had dreamed it in the night, and that I was a sort of ghostly lover? This will convince you that I am flesh and blood." And there followed another passionate embrace, for Brand was not chary of demonstration. "What soft cheeks you have! and such delicious kittenish ways," and so on; blanks may be filled by the imagination of the reader if he or she be fresh and youthful enough to recollect the transport of young passion.

"You have not said anything to the others, Esther?" asked Brand after a little while. "The Overstones don't guess, do they, that you—that I am sweet upon you?"

"No," answered Esther, upon whom the question jarred ever so slightly. "I couldn't speak of what was deep in my heart. It would seem like—like talking of God, or of my mother—to a person who only laughed at what I felt."

"Do you feel like *that* about it, Esther?" asked Brand, a little wonderingly.

"I don't quite know yet what I feel," answered Esther, "I wanted to be alone, that I might think about it more fully. I used always to be wondering about some things—things that I read of, or that came into my mind when I was walking by myself—and now they seem to be nearer. It was only in books that people ever were kind and good, or that they denied themselves for the sake of others. If my father had been good, mother would have been so much happier. Everything that was real was hard and cruel—and it seemed most cruel of all that one should be given thoughts and longings, that were of no use except to make one miserable; but now it is as though they might be of use to us—as though they might teach people to understand each other clearly."

Esther was taking up her thoughts brokenly, with a helpless searching after the right words with which to convey what was in her mind. In all her young life she had seemed out of harmony with outward things, and this had vaguely puzzled her, but now external life seemed to have been brought into agreement with her inner longings, and she attributed this wonderful change entirely to the new element Brand had imported into her existence. But he had no sympathy with anything so incapable of demonstration, and though he was stroking her hand softly all the time, he was not paying much heed to her words. He did not understand them, or follow in the least the bent of her mind. He was thinking how pretty she looked, as she glanced up at him with an expression that was almost beseeching on her face. She was mutely asking him for what he could never give her; but he was quite unconscious of any mental divergence between them. He was wondering within himself how he could ever give her up—how it would end. Then this consideration roused him to replying to her vague utterances, as he had dimly interpreted them.

“Of course, darling,” he said; “I can enter into your feelings. The Overstones are so rough and coarse, they could never understand you;

and I would much rather they did not know how—how things are between us. But there is Lydyiard—he guesses—and he may speak to you, and try to make mischief between us, but you must not pay attention to anything he may say. Darling,” he added, passionately clasping her tighter—and she could feel his heart beating in a way that almost frightened her—“I have been thinking. If we could only go away together—away, quite by our own two selves—from these people who do not understand you—and who are cruel to you.”

“*They* are not unkind,” whispered Esther, nodding loyally towards the house. “They mean nothing but good to me; and as for the other—he is my father.”

“What does it matter about him?” cried George, hotly. “If you would trust yourself to me—to me only, we would go away together. I would do you no harm. You are not afraid of me—of being alone with me? you would not fear that I should hurt you, Esther?”

Esther, in her ignorance, saw no veiled meaning in George’s words. She did not know that there could be any less legitimate connection between man and woman than that implied by marriage. She had lived all her life upon the island. She knew no one but the Overstones and the pilots.

In the few books she had read, moral wrong of that kind had been presented to her under the vaguest colouring. And yet, as George's wife she had not apportioned to herself any definite future. She had not thought of marriage, though of course, upon reflection, it constituted the only possible result to her present ecstatic condition. It had seemed to her that the whole type of womanhood had in her person received a new and astonishing revelation. She could hardly realise that there were many women in the world, who had gone through precisely the same experience; and of the material obligations conveyed by the word "wife," she had the most Arcadian notion.

"Afraid?" she repeated; "no, I am not afraid of you."

"My own!" he whispered, still more passionately. "Then you will come—you will trust yourself to me? We will go away."

"Where, sir?" asked Esther, her imagination excited by the thought of travel.

"To Sydney first—afterwards to England—the Mediterranean—wherever my regiment may be ordered; but it would not matter in the least where we were sent; it would be sure to be some jolly place, and we should be together. You see," he went on more hurriedly, "I am not my own

master. It is not as though I were rich and independent ; I can't do what I choose. It would be a long time before I could think of marrying you, or of taking you to Grately. I don't know how I could do it—what would happen. There's my uncle—Lord Coniston—he gives me everything, and I dare not offend him. He would expect me to marry my equal in position ; someone wealthy and high-born. It's all nonsense, but there it is. You understand me, darling ? ”

Brand thought he had made his meaning clear to her, and waited breathlessly for her reply. But Esther was far from apprehending it.

“ I think I do,” she said, drawing herself a little farther from him, her lips quivering. “ You mean that he would be angry with you for loving me—because I am ignorant and poor ; and nothing would ever make me the same as your cousin, for instance, who has been brought up so differently. Oh, I understand. It would be like the king you were reading about the other day, and the beggar maid. I am only a beggar maid. It is your goodness which has made you care for me. I had not thought of marrying you now. I had thought of nothing, but that I might love you. And as for money,” she continued, hotly and tremulously, “ that is nothing—nothing. Would I not scorn myself if I cared for money ! I have worked

all my life. I would work for you, as wives work for their husbands, if you wished it."

"My poor Esther!" said Brand; "do you think I would let you do that?"

"I could cook, and wash, and mend for you," Esther went on; "what have I known better? Oh, sir! when two people love each other everything should be equal; but I could not bear that you should stoop—that you should regret—I could bear better to be left."

"Everything *is* equal," cried Brand, swept by a wave of remorse at his vague intention of wronging her. He could not be a villain; it would be like murdering a child to deceive one so innocent. He kissed her again, but more tranquilly. "Everything *shall* be equal," he repeated, with an emphasis which startled her.

She put her lips to his hand with a gesture infinitely touching. It seemed to her that their relationship had within the last few moments assumed a new aspect. "I love you for being so noble," she murmured; "but you must not stoop to me. I only want to love you—that you should love me—not marry me—now. There are other things which would make it impossible for me to go away. I could not leave my father; I promised my mother that, even if he were unkind to me, I would never forsake him. One

could never break a promise made to a person who was dead, and who one knew, had felt very deeply about the thing they had asked one."

"Are you afraid that your mother's ghost might haunt you?" asked George. "My darling, even the angels could not hold you bound to a drunken brute who ill-treats you!"

"You don't understand," said Esther, in a pained voice.

"You are a Quixotic darling," exclaimed George; "but let the matter rest," he added, lightly accepting the easiest solution of the difficulty. "Let us be happy in the joys of to-day, and leave the future to take care of itself. There is no use in bothering over the morrow."

At that moment Mr. Overstone's voice jarred upon their ears.

"Where is Esther?" he asked, awakening suddenly from his nap in the verandah. "I have hardly seen the gell since we came back."

"I ought to go in," murmured Esther.

"She is with the children," replied Mrs. Overstone; "perhaps she is tired and has gone to bed. It was late when you came home; and she has been helping me to clean the house after the storm. She is a weedy, dreamy thing; I doubt that she'll ever be able to earn her own living. Such a

muck as you never saw. The hams in the meat-house soured to the bone, and my last boiling of jam half spoiled with water."

"I'll go to bed," whispered Esther, disengaging herself from George's arms; "I couldn't face them now, and they'll not miss me."

George broke off a bunch of jasmine and gave it to her; "Dream of me, darling—say that you will dream of me. I know that you will flit before my 'slumbrous vision' like a phantom eluding my grasp when possession seems a certainty."

There was another passionate embrace, and then Esther crept to bed. She fell asleep with the jasmine against her cheek, like a talisman which admitted her into a charmed land.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RETURN TO THE PILOT STATION.

EARLY the next morning, when the whole party were sitting at breakfast, Joe Bride, travel-stained and weary, appeared in the verandah.

“Why, Joe!” exclaimed Mr. Overstone, “what has happened? Have you been here all night?”

“I’ve walked from the pilot station,” said Joe, “and I’m main tired, Muster Overstone. I’ve walked the whole blessed night—not but what it is pleasanter then, if there’s a bit of moon, and a more ekable temperature. However, I’d be thankful if you’d give me a mount back, sir. I’ve come for Esther.”

“For me!” exclaimed Esther. “Did my father send for me? Is there anything wrong?”

“Well, he have said as he’d like to see you,” said Joe, “and it ain’t no one’s duty to deny a gell to her father. Hagart’s had an awful

bad bout of it this time. The shakes and the devils fearful. We've been nussing him—my old woman and me—but it warn't a fit sight for a gell; and till he knew hisself a bit, I kep it from you, Miss Esther."

"Oh, Joe!" exclaimed Esther, reproachfully, "it wasn't right of you. You know I would have gone back at once. Has he been so very ill? You should have come for me sooner, Joe; I'll be ready to start in a minute."

"You needn't hurry, Miss Esther. There's no fear of Hagart missing you—Nancy is seeing after him. Her first husband died in drink, so it comes natural like. I must have a bit of summat to eat before we start—if Muster Overstone'll let me go into the kitchen. Well," he added, his eyes resting on Esther's face with an almost paternal pride; "you are looking bonny; is it the salt, or what, that has brought such a pretty pink in your cheeks?—I doubt it was the smell of brandy that made you look so sickly—though to be sure, barmaids have mostly high colours—of a sort."

"It's the feeding. It's the feeding," said Mr. Overstone decisively. "Go and have your breakfast, Joe, I'll be out in a few moments to see after the horses."

Mr. Overstone gulped down his last draught

of tea, and followed Bride into the yard. Esther hastily swallowed hers, and left the room to make her preparations for the ride. Joe and the squatter stood talking earnestly at the kitchen door for a minute, and then the latter re-entered, a concerned look upon his fat face.

“From what Joe says, Gritty, I think that Hagart has about done for himself this time—I always said drink would kill him, and I doubt that he’ll ever get up again.”

Mrs. Overstone looked placidly up from a piece of bread and butter she was spreading for Bessie.

“Well, Andrew, I have told you before that Esther might have a home here if you are willing. She’s a weedy thing, and not strong enough to be of much use in carrying baby; but feeding will improve her, and she will save us the bother of those black gins, at any rate.”

Brand could barely restrain his disgust and impatience at Mrs. Overstone’s utilitarian view of the matter.

“There’s time enough to think of that, Gritty, when her father is off the hooks; but I’m bothered about the gell to-day. It goes against me to send her off alone with Joe. He and the other men might be signalled for, to a steamer, and Nancy is a dropsical old body. Ef Hagart should turn violent, there’s no knowing what might come to

the women—and if he dies, a corpse is poor company for a gell.”

“To be sure there is the laying out!” said practical Mrs. Overstone, “but Nancy is equal to that. I haven’t had much experience with dead bodies myself. If you’re thinking of me going, Andrew, it is quite out of the question. I couldn’t leave the children—or the house—with the muck in the kitchen, and the mince-meat to be made, and the grape jelly to be boiled all over again—I couldn’t do it.”

“No, no,” said Mr. Overstone, “but I was wondering if I could go.”

“You know best, Andrew, but I should say it was just impossible; you must remember that there’s the beast in the yard for killing, and the men will be up from the south end this evening for rations. We cooked the last piece of beef yesterday—a bit of the brisket it was—and there’s fowls for dinner to-day.”

“No, no, you’re right,” said Mr. Overstone, “I could not leave the head station.”

“I will go,” said Lydyiard, rising abruptly; “it is not right that so young a girl should be alone. I have had some experience of men in the pilot’s condition, and I will ride back with Esther and Bride if you will lend me a horse.”

“Now that’s the very thing!” exclaimed Mr.

Overstone, visibly relieved. "There are plenty of horses—and it is kind of you to propose it, Mr. Lydyiard."

"And I will go also," cried Brand, "I might be of use."

"You had better stay where you are, Brand," said Lydyiard, shortly; "your leave will expire directly."

Brand darted upon him a fiery glance.

"I'll see about that, I will telegraph from the pilot station—and it is all the more reason that I should be on the spot."

"Then there need be but one chicken cooked," murmured Mrs. Overstone *sotto voce*; and so the matter was settled.

Esther was too full of thoughts of her father, and of self-reproach at her utter forgetfulness of him, to talk much to George on the way home, and Mr. Lydyiard kept so closely beside her that it was impossible to converse privately with her lover. Her sensitive conscience was troubling her, and she was aching with the fear that she had not acted as her mother would have wished, in leaving her father, to seek her own pleasure at Bully Wallah. The intensity of the happiness made the wrong-doing seem greater, and though her sense of filial obligation was not large in the abstract, she had an almost

superstitious reverence for the promise she had given her dying mother.

Once, impelled by a longing for sympathy, she said suddenly to Lydyiard, whose eye she had caught, "Oh, do you think that it was wicked to leave him? was it wrong of me to go to Bully Wallah?"

"I am glad to see that you think of what you *ought* to have done," said he, "but, my poor child, it would have been hard for you to witness what Joe and his wife have seen. It was no duty of yours to nurse your father." He spoke sternly, and then dropped behind, as though to avoid further conversation.

As they neared the pilot station, Joe Bride, with visible anxiety, gave his horse the rein, and was the first to enter Hagart's cottage. The rest followed more slowly, and George was helping Esther to dismount, when Bride came out again and whispered something to Mr. Lydyiard. Both the men looked horror-stricken, and Esther, watching their faces, was startled by the fear that something had happened, and was about to rush into the sitting-room, when Lydyiard putting forth his hand restrained her. "No, Esther," he said, "don't go in just yet. Come down with me to Bride's hut. I have something to say to you."

“What is it?” cried Esther; “I can’t hear it now. I want to go to my father—I ought not to have left him—I am sure that he is very ill. I am not afraid—oh, let me go to him at once!”

“No,” said Lydyiard, “you cannot go to him now; he does not need you. You must hear first what I have to tell you.”

Esther turned with whitened face from Lydyiard to Joe, and then to the group of sailors, who, with Bride’s wife, had assembled upon the verandah. “Nancy is here,” she exclaimed, “and something dreadful has happened—I see it in your looks! Oh tell me, please! What is the good of making a mystery and keeping me in suspense? I *must* know. If my father is dying I ought to be with him.”

“He will never want you any more, Esther,” said Lydyiard.

“He is dead, then!” exclaimed Esther. “Oh, he *can’t* be with mother.” The first thought which rose in the poor girl’s mind was that the disturbing presence might have broken upon the peace of her loved one. “Oh, I don’t know what I am saying,” she added piteously, and her beseeching eyes sought Brand’s face. It was like an appeal for help, and the young man, moved by a swift impulse of love and compassion, drew

a little nearer and put his arm around her. "I am here, Esther," he murmured.

"Yes he's dead, Miss Esther," said Joe solemnly; "we must all on us die, but the end of some of us is a warning to the rest. I didn't let on to you at the station how bad Hagart were, but I was half afear'd that something might have happened afore I got back. Things mostly do happen when you're away, and perhaps it's a mercy, of a sort, that they do."

"It's a mussy as he cut his own throat, and not her'n or our'n," declared Nancy Bride emphatically.

"Hold your jaw you — old fool," cried Joe.

"I've said it, Joe, many a time over," repeated Nancy, "and I ain't got no call to hold my jaw now, as my words have come true. It's a mussy as we warn't all murdered in our beds last night; and you away, and me a heavy body as couldn't run to save my life. He were took with the horrors on him again, soon after you had set off last evening. The men looked for him when he were missing this morning—for I slep sound, thinking he was quiet, and being a heavy body—and found him stretched on the grave yonder with——"

Esther put out her hands in a helpless pleading way—and Nancy stopped, arrested by her

horror-stricken face. The ground seemed to sway under Esther's feet; she was barely conscious of George's tightened clasp. All the awfulness of the tragedy seemed heightened ten-fold in her imagination, by the mention of her mother's grave.

"Can't you hold your tongue!" exclaimed Brand angrily. "Don't you see that you are making the young lady ill by your talk?"

Nancy turned away with a *sotto voce* reference to fine folk and their feelings. She was not an ill-natured body, or even unsympathetic, after the manner of her kind. She had been herself relieved by the timely demise of a drunken husband, and from her point of view Esther was to be rather congratulated than otherwise upon the event that had just taken place. It must surely be pleasanter to live in the midst of peace and plenty at Bully Wallah than to lead a wretched uncared-for existence at the pilot station; and then the lower classes always find a ghoul-like delight in piling on the agony—a death robbed of its details loses half its importance.

"You see!" exclaimed Brand with supreme disgust, "how it would have been, if we had not come back with her." He was chafing Esther's hands, and trying to sooth her into

calmness, for she was now weeping hysterically. "Don't cry, darling!" he whispered, "I am here to take care of you. Don't listen to what that blundering old idiot says."

"I'm none so sure that it warn't best to blurt it all out in a heap," said Joe. "Women are queer customers, and they know best how to deal with one another."

"Esther!" said Lydyiard, taking her hand and gently detaching her from her lover's arms, "come with me. No, Brand, you stay here, you can do the girl no good. Come, Esther!"

He led her along the cliff to Bride's hut, which was at the distance of a few yards from the place where they had dismounted. He took her into the living room, and supporting her tottering frame, placed her upon a chair. Then he peered about in search of some restorative, and after a little search found some brandy in a bottle, in a cupboard beneath the dresser. He poured some into a pannikin, and mixing it with water, made her drink it. She had fallen into a state of hysterical shivering.

"Oh, it is dreadful—it's dreadful!" she kept repeating at intervals. "If only he hadn't killed himself! Oh, do you think that God can ever forgive him?"

"Esther," said Lydyiard, "if you think over

it, you will see that it is no more wicked to take one's life in a mad impulse, than to kill body and soul deliberately with drink."

"I can't think," said Esther, bewildered by this apparent sophistry. "I thought that it was worse than anything to kill oneself—that one could never go to Heaven, and that there could be no repentance or forgiveness. Bad people are often sorry when they are dying, and at the last God forgives them, as he forgave the thief. Oh, I should not have gone away! Mother will think that I did not do my best to keep him from harm. Do you think there is blood *there*?" she asked, pointing to the grave; "it was there they found him: Nancy said so, did she not? The blood may have soaked in," and then she began to shiver and cry again.

Lydyiard forced her to swallow some more brandy, and then made her lie down upon the pallet sofa, bringing pillows from Nancy's bed in the next room, to support her head. He took off her hat and gloves, and tended her with the gentleness of a woman. It was wonderful to see how tender he could be. By and by she became composed again. "I think that I had better leave you," he said, feeling her pulse, after he had settled her comfortably. "Lie here, and I will send Nancy down so that she may be

within call, but I will tell her not to disturb you. You are agitated, and it would be best if you could keep quite quiet. This will wear off. You have had much to excite you lately."

Esther coloured. "You know?" she asked in a low tone.

"Yes, I know," said Lydyiard. "He must leave you soon. Don't try to detain him. He ought to be in Sydney where his duty lies. And you——"

"I shall live at Bully Wallah, I suppose," replied Esther, in a dreary accent of voice. "I don't want to keep him if it is right that he should go away—but he will come back again."

"And if he were never to come back," said Mr. Lydyiard, "should you grieve very much?"

Esther's lip quivered, but she made no answer.

"There!" exclaimed Lydyiard, afraid of agitating her. "Don't think of it now. Try and sleep, if you can."

He left her, and walked to the pilot's hut, where he found that Bride had already telegraphed to Frazerville for the coroner, and one of the sailors had started on Brand's horse to Bully Wallah, to apprise Mr. Overstone, the nearest magistrate, of what had occurred.

Early the following morning, the coroner

arrived from Frazerville in the government steam launch, and held the necessary inquest upon Hagart's body. Such ceremonies are conducted in the backwoods with an absence of formalities that considerably expedites their performance.

Mr. Overstone appeared later in the day, bringing with him an unsalted portion of the beast he had killed the previous evening, for, as Mrs. Overstone practically remarked, "Meat is sustaining in affliction;" and Hagart's death would not proportionably lessen the demand. She had also thrust a Prayer-book upon her lord at the last moment, so that he might be prepared for all emergencies—it being customary in Australia, when clerical assistance is not forthcoming, to delegate the discharge of all such duties as burials and baptisms, to the nearest magistrate.

Esther remained in Joe's hut till the inquest was over and the coroner had departed. In the afternoon Mr. Lydyiard came to tell her that they had decided upon burying the body immediately, and that if she wished to see her father again, she had better walk up with him to the cottage where Hagart's body still lay. Esther shrank with involuntary horror from the sight. "Is it very terrible?" she asked piteously, of Lydyiard; "I should not like to see what I should dream of afterwards. I was dreaming of

him last night as he——” She broke off, shuddering. “Must I go?”

“There is no reason for you to come unless you wish it,” replied Lydyiard, “but there is nothing which could give you pain or make you more unhappy. I should not have come for you, had I not thought that you might by and by feel glad that you had seen him at his best. It is right that you should know what he was like when he was younger and better. The face has changed, and the sight of your father as he lies now, may remove the impression you have formed of him, which might haunt you in the future.”

Esther took the arm Mr. Lydyiard offered her, and, supported by him, walked with faltering steps along the cliff to her old home. She wept all the way, more from the unhinging which her nervous system had undergone, and the prostration caused by her fit of hysterics the day before, than from any acute personal grief.

Hagart's coffin was placed upon the sofa in the sitting-room, and the rest of the party were all congregated in the verandah, waiting to follow it to the grave, which had been dug that morning, in the inclosure beside that of Esther's mother. The girl shrank tremblingly from the corpse, but the first sight of her father's dead face changed her feeling of dread into one of soft pity and

child-like yearning. Features which in life have been disfigured by vice or excess, often return after death to the similitude of what they were in youth. It was so with Hagart. All trace of coarseness had gone from the face, and the beauty for which it must once have been remarkable, was now strikingly apparent. As Esther bent over and kissed his brow, a flood of filial tenderness swept into her heart; she could have loved him so dearly had he been always like this. It was easier to understand now the infatuation which had made her mother cling to a drunken and brutal husband to the last.

While she was weeping quietly as she stood over the coffin, feeling almost a joy in the tenderness of her tears, the telegraph-needle began clicking in the adjoining room. Bride went in to receive the communication, and Esther, accustomed to read by sound the telegrams as they passed through, mechanically translated the message without fully taking in its import.

"It is for you," said she in a low voice to Brand, who had followed her in from the verandah, in the hope of exchanging a few words unheard; "it is for you—from Sydney—they want you back again;" then realising more thoroughly how the mandate would immediately affect her,

she cried out in an irrepressible burst : “ Oh ! I can’t bear it—I can’t bear it ! ”

“ What is it, my gell ? ” cried Mr. Overstone, looking up from the burial service, which he had been studying in a confused endeavour to discover the rules of the church as bearing upon the question of suicide. “ Earth to earth, and dust to dust. Here the evil and the just. It’s a bad thing to give way ; it don’t do any good in the long run. He used to beat you, you know ; and you’re coming home with me presently where you’ll be well taken care of. Now here’s a thing,” exclaimed Mr. Overstone, with more energy, holding the Prayer-book close to his nose and spluttering out the following words which head the burial service : “ ‘ Here it is to be noted, that the office ensuing is not to be used for any that die unbaptised or excommunicate—or have laid violent hands upon themselves.’ The missus said I was to read the prayers, but I think I had better not—under the circumstances, you know ; it might not be lawful.”

“ Laws ! you ain’t a parson,” said Nancy in a tone of derision ; “ and it’s only for such like, that them things are written. I’ve heerd afore now that them as have laid hands on themselves hadn’t ought to be buried in a churchyard ; but my man, though he died in drink, died natural

—and I never took no heed on it. There ain't no bishops here to find fault; and it 'ud go agin me to think of a man as I nussed, thrown into the ground any how, like a dog. Any ways, the bit of prayer can't hurt you, Muster Overstone, and you a magistrate—I'd say it, if it's only to let the Lord know as we're grateful it warn't any wuss than the poor man cutting his own throat. Think o' that, Esther, and it'll keep you from taking on too much."

"You have got a telegram?" said Lydyiard, addressing Brand, whose face had changed considerably while he was reading the bit of blue paper that Joe had handed him. "What is it? Are you recalled?"

"Yes; d—n it," exclaimed Brand. "Read that."

This was the substance of the telegram. "Regiment recalled to England. Return at once to headquarters."

"Well," said Lydyiard, "there's no help for it—you must go."

The paper was passed round the circle, and while the others were reading and commenting, George placed himself at Esther's side, and took her hand.

"England!" she murmured in a tone of deep distress; "I thought it would have been Sydney,

and that you would come back. Oh! what am I to do? How am I to go on living?"

"Don't cry, my sweetest," murmured George; "it is deuced hard lines for me as well as for you. Do you think that I don't feel it too?"

His voice was husky with emotion. The blow was very bitter to him. For the moment he felt that it was the worst that could have befallen him. He pressed her hand convulsively, forgetting everything but that she was in trouble, and that he loved her, and was obliged to leave her. But immediately after this first shock, he thrilled all over with that excitement which is aroused by the mere scent of war, and that makes men leave wife and children, and volunteer for active service—and Brand was an Englishman and a soldier, and had more than once lamented that he had never been called upon to go through a campaign. We must all remember how in the years '74 and '75 there were rumours of war afloat. In Australia, distance from the possible scene of action intensified expectation, and gave significance to the vaguest report. There was ample food for conjecture in the recall of a regiment.

"Them Rooshians will be knocked into smithereens," said Joe, impressively, "and serve 'em right."

“War!” exclaimed Mr. Overstone, dropping his Prayer-book, “well, it seems likely. England may be at it now. There’s no knowing what may happen in these days. Things are settled so quickly. Sedan was fought, and the Prussians in front of Paris before we knew that war had begun. Now that was an extraordinary thing, you know!”

“I don’t think there is likely to be war at present,” said Mr. Lydyiard. “There was a talk of recalling Brand’s regiment before we left Sydney.”

“I think Muster Overstone as we ought to get on with the berryin’,” observed Nancy Bride, to whom the issues at hand were of greater moment than those that were doubtful and afar—and then she was reflecting upon the juicy steak from Bully Wallah that was to furnish forth Joe’s evening meal.

“Yes—yes, my good woman,” said Mr. Overstone, “yes, we had better get on with the burial—I’ll read a prayer. Not the service right through, you know—in case of there being anything wrong. Now that’s a thing to be seen to.—a special service for suicides you know. It’s taking the future life for granted, in a way that’s trying to the feelings of survivors.”

Mr. Overstone shut up his Prayer-book, having

first turned down a leaf at the spot, and then proceeded with the active business of the funeral, which occupied his attention and that of the sailors till the procession got under weigh. Esther sat apart, pale and motionless, a few tears falling silently upon her lap, but otherwise showing no sign of overwhelming sorrow. She had reached that point in emotional life when the sufferer is only conscious of a painful individuality—when sensation becomes so intensified, that the images of things outward seem to group themselves without any immediate reference to the one absorbing grief or interest. This talk of war and discussion of the burial service in the very presence of the corpse; this ghastly mingling of the tragical and the commonplace; even the tender words which George was whispering over her, seemed to have nothing to do with herself. She hardly realised what he was saying to her—scarcely knew anything but that she was suffering. When the time came for her to move, she took her place behind the coffin and walked with the rest, but it was almost as if she had been in a dream.

And so poor Hagart died and was buried beside the woman who had loved him; and the thoughts of all the men who followed him to his grave were for the most part more taken up

with Brand's recall and the likelihood of a European war, than with his sad fate and the moral to be deduced from it. Only Lydyiard pondered over the tragedy, and saw in it a deeper significance than was apparent to the rest. He had acquired a habit common to those who have undergone in early life an intellectual or emotional convulsion, of looking at events from an impersonal point of view, and of considering the machinery of circumstance as a spectator might study the complex workings of a mechanical instrument, without being absolutely certain of the result it would accomplish.

"Esther," whispered George as they parted for the night, "where can I see you, and when? We must be alone together to-morrow—I have so much to say—I must talk to you. Where can we meet?"

"There," said Esther, indicating with a melancholy wave of her hand the spot which they had just quitted; "I will be there—at the grave—soon after breakfast to-morrow."

CHAPTER X.

THE RECALL OF GEORGE BRAND.

ESTHER and George met at the double grave early upon the following morning, and held a last distracting interview over the newly-turned sods. It was not the spot George would have chosen for a love tryst, but Esther saw no incongruity between the scene and the meeting. Without actually continuing to cherish her first fancy that George's advent was in some way referable to unseen spiritual agencies, she still felt that there would always remain in her mind a sadly sweet connection between her memories of her departed lover, and of her dead mother.

Not that she for a moment contemplated the necessity of nerving herself to an eternal parting—she had all the belief of a young enthusiastic girl in constancy as synonymous with love—and though she feared that George's return might be long deferred, she still regarded it as a

certainly. But with George it was different. He had experience enough to know that this sudden separation from Esther would probably result in the complete division of their lives, and also a lurking feeling that circumstance had removed from his path a possible temptation, and had solved for him a problem which he had not moral strength to face. It is always a relief to weak, self-indulgent natures, when their course is suddenly decided for them by a force beyond their power of control. George felt that had he remained upon the island, Esther, in her forlorn and homeless condition, would have been easily persuaded to elope with him to Sydney. Passion might have got the better of him, and hurried him into an act from which his better self—now that he thought of it in cold blood—recoiled with shame. He was not given to the contemplation of possible consequences resulting from the indulgence of his inclinations, but Esther had touched a holier chord in his nature than he himself was aware. He was glad that he had done her no injury. Quite an heroic sense of virtue took possession of him, and after the first shock of mental horror at the depths of baseness to which he might have fallen, had passed from him, he began to experience a thrill of self-approval

that was new and delightful, and to fancy that his departure was rather voluntary than forced upon him.

It must not, however, be supposed that he at once took comfort in this cold course of reasoning. He had felt as wretched as a man can well feel, for some hours after the receipt of his commanding officer's telegram ; but a passionate outburst the previous evening had exhausted the sources of regret, and with the resilience of a shallow, excitable temperament, he had turned as a counterpoise to the thought of new scenes, if there were war to the excitement of active service, and the thousand opportunities which would present themselves of proving what a fine fellow he was ; and if not, to the chances of removal to pleasant quarters : to hunting and shooting in the winter, to meeting of old friends, and to recounting of his Australian experiences, with a due emphasis upon his own prowess, in field and drawing-room.

As he walked briskly along the shore, with a light breeze blowing whiffs of salt air into his face, his troubles seemed wonderfully lightened. There passed before his imagination's eye, pleasant visions of after-dinner sittings over the old Grately port : of county banquets of which he should be the hero, and of nice titillation of his vanity by homage rendered to him, as the travelling

companion of "Lydyiard, you know, the man who writes. We went up together to see his new settlement, an island on the coast of Australia, and had no end of fun, riding after cattle—bush fires, and all that sort of thing." The words came quite glibly to his tongue, and then he thought of a small vivacious face, and a pair of dancing dark eyes, and could even hear the inflection of his pretty cousin Lina's voice: "But, darling boy, what awful old frumps you must think us who have scarcely ever been out of England in our lives." He felt quite a desire to see his cousin Lina, who was such a jolly girl and up to no end of larks. He began to wonder whether the Grately coverts would be well stocked this year, and whether he should win his bet with Littleton upon the number of birds he would bring down in a day's shoot. On the whole England was perhaps a pleasanter place than Australia; and as for Esther—sweet little creature! he should always remember her, and think of her as apart from any other woman he had ever known; and if she had only been in his own station of life, and he could have married her—but that was quite impossible—and it was noble of him to give her up. There was no knowing what might have come of the connection, and he could never have forgiven

himself if he had wronged her . . . but, poor darling ! how pretty she was—and how fond of him. He was certain that he could never care for any one so much again ; but it was no use making a fuss and funkng over the business—the wrench had to be borne.

This was the conclusion to which, with tightening heart-strings, George came during his walk to the grave ; but when he saw Esther with her little wan face, and quivering lips, and the tears which suffused her eyes and made them look larger and softer, without running down and disfiguring her cheeks or reddening her eyelids, he could no longer review his position with philosophic optimism, but felt passionately rebellious against Fate, and to the full as despairingly wretched as the most exacting heart could under the circumstances have desired.

No one who could have seen him then clasping Esther to his heart, and pouring forth protestations of love and constancy, would have believed that only a few moments before he had decided upon the expediency of separation.

“ Mousie,” he said, “ you won’t forget me will you ? You’ll give me a solemn promise that no matter what happens in the future, you’ll belong to me and to no one else.”

“ I promise,” replied Esther, looking at him

with her great eyes, and thinking within herself that there was no need for him to exact such a vow.

George took a ring from his little finger—a plain band of gold with three diamonds in a gipsy setting—and placed it upon the third finger of her left hand.

“This is to be a sign that we are as good as married, Esther. Whenever you look at it you must think of me, and remember that you have given yourself to me. Do you understand, Mousie? And I’ll come back for you as soon as I can. Never mind if you don’t hear from me very often—I’m a shocking fellow to write, I hate it so—but whatever happens, you belong to me, recollect—and I am certain to come back to you. Then we will go away together, and live in England, at Grately perhaps, and we shall be so happy together.”

The repetition of lovers’ vows suggests painful reflections to the observer of life. So much freshness of passion and sincerity of motive seem at first to teach a greater faith in the stability of human affection, and it is sad to have forced upon one the conviction, sure to come later, that all this purity of sentiment and intensity of feeling is but as so much froth upon the stream of wasted emotion.

Fate was cruel to the lovers that day. As they sat together upon a little knoll above the grave, with the smiling ocean stretched before them, interchanging despairing vows, and prolonging with an intensity of enjoyment that was almost pain, the few hours they might spend together, a steamer with its long trail of smoke, appeared large and distinct between the sea and the sky. George was the first to see it, and clutching Esther's hand eagerly, he lifted it, pointing out towards the horizon.

"Mousie," he exclaimed. "Do you see that? We must go back. We must go back at once."

He was so excited that he seemed almost to forget that the steamer was the merciless Fate which was to bear him away from her.

"She's a large one," cried George. "I wonder if she is bound to Sydney. It would be just my luck if she were. Oh, I wonder if they'll signal from the Cape. I think she must be the mail boat. It is southward she is going, Esther, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is south," said Esther, in a choked voice.

"Come," said George, rising. "We must hurry back and tell Bride to signal her. Come, darling. Oh, don't cry, I can't bear to see you crying—it unmans me."

He took her hand, and hurried her along the beach. He was full of eagerness and excitement—she, limp and despairing. He pulled her over the stones, and together they skimmed rapidly along the sand ; George looking back every now and then when he felt her drooping, to say, “ Oh, don’t cry, darling—don’t cry, Mousie.”

When they reached the pilot station they found the sailors all on the *qui vive*. The steamer was indeed the mail boat bound south, and Bride, acting upon Lydyiard’s orders, had signalled her to stand to. There was no time to be lost. Brand hurriedly crammed his things into his portmanteaus while the sailors were getting out the boat, bade Lydyiard and Mr. Overstone good-bye, and left a substantial reminder of his visit in Nancy Bride’s pocket. Then he kissed Esther in a last impassioned embrace, and was finally rowed off to the steamer, disappearing in the same sudden manner as that in which he had arrived.

Poor Esther shut herself up in a state of hysterical collapse. She lay on her bed and cried, kissing the ring George had given her, and then hiding it away in her bosom. She pressed her hand upon her heart, and whispered to herself in her desolation, as in her first paroxysm of gratitude ; “ Oh, he is so good. I

do love him. Oh, what shall I do ? What shall I do ?”

If there had been any specific task to occupy her thoughts and energies, she could have borne her grief better, but there seemed nothing before her but the dull performance of a round of distasteful duties, and a deadness of that emotive life which had lately been called into such vigorous play. When a crushing sorrow befalls the young, it is to them as though the end of the world had come. Experience is the great teacher of fortitude. Those who are old enough to take a retrospect of mental crises through which they have passed, can look back and feel that they have enjoyed much that was left ; but the young have not this consolation, and the waves of present suffering seem to engulf them too deeply to allow a glimpse of land beyond.

No one, except perhaps Lydyiard, saw in her grief anything more than what would naturally be felt by a young girl whose only parent had died under circumstances so horrible. Mr. Overstone was anxious to return to Bully Wallah, but George's departure had delayed his own, and then he meant to take Esther back with him. There were several matters to be arranged on her behalf, and an examination to be made of the pilot's papers, and of such property as he had left, a

duty which naturally devolved upon Mr. Overstone as a magistrate, and as Esther's only protector.

The search was made quickly, and nothing found except an old tin desk beneath Hagart's bed, which promised to contain whatever instructions he might have left, or information concerning his antecedents—for there was a general feeling afloat that the pilot had not always been what he had seemed. Mr. Overstone and Lydyiard seated themselves at the table with the box between them, both with an uneasy feeling of a mystery to be solved; but with this difference, that whereas in the squatter's mind there was only a vague expectancy, in that of Mr. Lydyiard there was an almost certain conviction of the result of the investigation.

"I always said there was something queer about Hagart," said Mr. Overstone, fumbling with the key in the lock. "Now there were several things I couldn't make out at all; once or twice, when I was working at my pamphlets, he helped me to a classical quotation that told well; I'm not much of a Latin scholar myself. Now, that's puzzling, you know. Where the deuce did he learn Greek and Latin? Men ain't as a rule educated in that way for the pilot service. From little things that he has dropped

when he was half tight, I'm pretty certain that he was once in the navy, and I'll bet my hat that he didn't teach himself to draw—— Hullo! here's something addressed to me."

Mr. Overstone held up, and proceeded to open, a bulky envelope which lay on the top of the desk. It contained a letter to himself, and a sealed inclosure, which the squatter wonderingly spelled out, to :—

"SIR EMILIUS ISHERWOOD, BART.,
"Bar Wold House, Bar Wold,
"Woodfordshire, England."

"Eh! now that's a curious thing!" exclaimed Mr. Overstone; "well I'll see what he has to say;" and he read the following letter, which was dated from the pilot station about eighteen months previously :

"MY DEAR SIR,

"It has been borne in upon me very forcibly of late, that were I to die suddenly, my daughter Esther would be thrown destitute upon the tender mercies of a world which, though overflowing with benevolence towards the bereaved rich, has usually a very small measure of compassion to bestow upon the poor.

"You may reasonably remark that my solici-

tude is timed late, and that it would have been more to the purpose had I sought to lay up some provision for her during my life. I have never made any profession of absorbing attachment to my only child. She reminds me unpleasantly of her mother, whose life I ruined, and her very existence is a standing reproach to me; but even the worst of us have some innate sense of justice, and I would therefore do what now lies in my power to mitigate the unfortunate position in which I have placed her. You will probably have guessed that I once occupied a superior position in society. I glean as much from remarks you have sometimes let fall, though I am obliged to confess that your penetration deserves credit, for I have taken every pains to obliterate the hall-mark of gentility. I do not mean to lower myself still further by detailing the steps of my degradation. It has been my object to efface myself from the recollection of society, and I have refrained from obtruding myself or my belongings upon the notice of my relatives; but now that death seems to stare me in the face, I am stirred by a remorseful pity for Esther, and venture to ask for her, kindness that I should never have claimed for myself. In the inclosed letter I have committed Esther to the protection of my only brother, Sir Emilius

Isherwood. Some fraternal feelings may prompt him to offer her the place of a dependant in his house. It is bitter bread, but the sweetest that I can bespeak for her.

“ I must beg you, if you are at Bully Wallah at the time of my death, to forward this letter to Sir Emilius with a few words confirmatory of the statement I have made of my mode of life for the last ten years, and any information you can give as to the manner of my decease. I have no hesitation in further asking you to give Esther a home till a reply be received from her uncle. Should it be favourable, he will doubtless instruct you as to her future, and if, on the contrary, he refuses to acknowledge any claim she may have upon him, I shall have done for her what I can, and must leave her to take her chance of good or bad fortune, as other penniless girls have done before her. In conclusion, I have to beg that you will not inform Esther of her parentage till an answer be received from Sir Emilius.

“ I am,

“ Your obedient servant,

“ ROBERT ISHERWOOD.”

“ Robert Isherwood,” repeated Mr. Overstone. “ Now that’s a curious letter, a queer

start altogether! Can you make head or tail of it!"

"It is only what I have known all along," said Lydyiard incautiously; then pulling himself up he added, "that is, I have heard of the Isherwoods; they are a well known Woodfordshire family, and I was aware that there had been a scapegrace brother. This Robert Isherwood is of course the man."

"What do you suppose brought him to Australia?" asked Mr. Overstone. "Do you fancy that he was transported? The idea occurred to me when I heard that he had been in Perth. He let that drop one day."

"I cannot say," replied Mr. Lydyiard.

"He may have run through his money and taken to drink," continued Mr. Overstone reflectively. "There's many a well-born man goes to the devil in Australia, and then he is ashamed to face his people, and takes the first thing that's offered him. Sir Emilius Isherwood, Bart. ! Well it'll be a fine thing for Esther ef her uncle takes her up, but it's as likely as not that he'll object to having an unknown niece foisted upon him. Swells aren't so ready to harbour their poor relations ef they can get out of having anything to say to them, and gells are awkward articles to have thrown upon one's hands. I daresay the

end of it'll be that the missus will keep her at Bully Wallah, and give her the babies to mind."

"Mr. Overstone," said Lydyiard, "before you found this letter I had been considering Esther's future, and had almost resolved that it should be my care. I have no children—no near relations—and the girl interests me. If Sir Emilius Isherwood refuses to acknowledge her, I will send her to school, and take measures to provide for her."

Mr. Overstone pushed back his chair, and stared in some surprise at his companion.

"That's a liberal offer, Mr. Lydyiard, and not at all to be expected of you. I should say, if you asked my advice—a gell is a responsibility that's not easy to be got rid of; think well before you load yourself with it. And you're young enough—you might marry, you know; and women are a little awkward in their ways with one another. But perhaps it's another plan that you've got in your mind. I've heard of middle-aged men educating young gells for their wives. You don't mean that, do you?"

"No," said Lydyiard with a melancholy smile. "I never thought of marrying any one, least of all Esther. I shall be sixty my next birthday, and there's nothing further from my mind than marriage."

“To be sure,” said Mr. Overstone, “it ’ud beat me to find out what you or any one else could see in Esther to want to marry her for, a scraggy, big-eyed thing! That’s not my style, Mr. Lydyiard.”

“I am a lonely man,” continued Lydyiard, “and my life has been embittered from many causes. I am afraid that if I do not create for myself some close individual interest, I shall feel in my old age the need of a purpose in existence nearer to me than the general good. I have a little money, and I had rather adopt a girl than a boy; women are less apt to get into mischief.”

“That’s true enough,” said Mr. Overstone. “Well, Mr. Lydyiard, ef Esther’s uncle won’t have anything to say to her—which remains to be seen yet—it ’ud be a very good thing for the gell if you were to adopt her, and if you mean fair and honourable by her, as I believe you do, I’ll say nothing against it. Of course her father’s wishes are bound to be attended to, and I’ll write to Sir Emilius Isherwood at once. We’ll wait and see what he says about it, and I’ll let you know. I’m not wanting to get rid of the gell. I’m fond of Esther in a way, and I’d like to do the best I could for her. You see she’s left on my hands as it were, and I feel morally responsible that no harm comes to her. I dare

say we should find it a bit inconvenient to have a gell like that always dragging on at Bully Wallah ; she is a dreamy thing and has no *nous* at all. Not but what the missus would soon put a little of that into her. As for her marrying, why, ef a bachelor were to take my opinion, he'd look out for more flesh and blood and a deal more energy. That's the way I went to work, and I have never regretted it. I had got a little money together and had bought this station, but somehow I wasn't comfortable ; the buttons were always coming off my shirts, and the place looked in a muck. So I invited Gritty—she was a Frazer-ville gell—to come across with her mother and have a look at the island ; and when I got her here, I asked her plump and plain ef she liked the place, and ef she'd marry me. 'Yes, Andrew,' said she, and no nonsense over it, 'I will, and I'll make you comfortable ;' and I can tell you she has been as good as her word. The amount she has saved me in moleskin trousers alone you wouldn't believe. Now that's a point you should caution your selectors upon, Mr. Lydyiard ; it's no good their bringing out weedy wives, they'll be sorry for it ef they do."

Mr. Overstone had been turning over the papers in the desk during this discursive harangue, and had found at the bottom a small

packet of letters in a woman's handwriting, tied together with a piece of red tape. They were not endorsed, and he handed the bundle to Lydyiard. "I guess these are from Esther's mother. She sets a great store by her mother's memory, and I suppose ought to have them."

"Do you think," said Lydyiard, with a slight but visible hesitation, "that in the face of her father's request that she should not be made acquainted with her parentage, it would be right to let her read these letters, without being sure that they contain no reference to the pilot's past history?"

"I daresay you are right," said Mr. Overstone. "It would be as well to look over them. There can't be any secrets, and if there are why we are safe, you know. They'd be a comfort to the poor gell, eh, Mr. Lydyiard? Will you glance over them? It'll be more in your line than mine, I fancy."

Mr. Lydyiard looked fixedly for a few moments at the superscription upon the uppermost envelope, but a film seemed to rise between his eyes and the paper, and he turned his head away. "Yes, yes," he said hurriedly, "I'll glance over them if I may—if you think proper. It would be well to ascertain that there are no allusions—that there is nothing in them which would violate her

father's wish. If there be anything painful or dishonourable in the early history of her parents, it is surely best that Esther should not know it."

"It's as much your business as mine," said Mr. Overstone, "since you are willing to adopt the gell; so take the letters, and look them over. That is all now. There is nothing here; no memorandum of money saved—that all went to the public-house—no further instructions. 'These are Government papers, which had better be handed over to Joe Bride. He is sure to be put into Hagart's place."

Lydyiard took the letters, and Mr. Overstone locked up the desk, and placed it among the baggage which was to be conveyed upon the pack-horse to Bully Wallah. Joe Bride promised to take care of the pictures; it was thought that the sale of the furniture might bring in sufficient to buy Esther two or three black gowns, and such like necessaries. This was all the patrimony she had to expect, and she would have entered Mr. Overstone's family destitute indeed, had not Lydyiard, as an earnest of future intentions, handed the squatter a cheque for a hundred pounds upon Esther's account.

"It may be held in reserve," he said, "till Sir Emilius's answer comes. If she goes to England let it be spent upon her outfit, and if any remains

it may be given to her for her private use. There is no knowing what emergencies may arise. You will let me know at once what is Sir Emilius's reply to his brother's letter. Should he disown the appeal, Esther's future will be my charge, and I will at once communicate with you."

Mr. Overstone pocketed the cheque with some mental wonderment over the generosity of his eccentric guest. It was a matter beyond his comprehension, but he told his wife of the discovery of Esther's parentage, and of the interest she had excited in Lydyiard. In consequence, the girl entered her new home under more favourable auspices than would have been possible had she been completely dependent upon the Overstones' bounty. It is only fair to state that the latter were entirely above mercenary considerations, and expected to reap no future benefit from any kindness shown to their young charge; but it is not in human nature to class in the same category the niece of a baronet and possible heiress of an eccentric man of letters, and the destitute daughter of a drunken pilot.

CHAPTER XI.

GHOSTS OF THE PAST.

LYDYIARD rode back to Bully Wallah with the packet of letters in his breast pocket. He could hardly define to himself the curious emotion with which the possession of these time-stained papers thrilled him! It was so long since his wife had left him—to the reader, his relations with Esther's mother can be no mystery—that the once strong personal feeling he had entertained for her had resolved itself into a powerful, but passive abstract influence.

Now, the sight of her handwriting brought crowding upon him a host of sensations, some new, some long dormant. He recalled her to his mind as she had been in the old days, and then tried, but with no success, to reconcile that impression of her with the one that Joe Bride's description and Esther's revelations had produced.

Though he and his wife had lived together but for a comparatively short time, and with no harmony in their marriage, they had unconsciously acted and re-acted upon each other. No event in Lydyiard's existence had so strongly influenced his inner life as his wife's desertion of him. It had changed his moral attitude towards society, not in one great revolution, but in swiftly succeeding stages of resentment, scorn, then doubting inquiry, and distrust of his own infallibility, finally, conviction of error, and remorse. Time, and the alteration in his religious opinions, had softened down these turbulent emotions into a sorrowful passivity. There had been a period in his life when he had wished vainly to discover his lost wife, and to atone in some way for a wrong which he fancied that he had committed against her. Now he had found her, when action was impossible, when the grave had closed over her, and when all that he could gather about her life and feelings conjured up an entirely different image to any he had pictured to himself, and one which it was impossible to reconcile with his old idea of her.

He was not angry with her, or even with his rival. He had no jealousy in his heart, no resentment—no very keen emotion of any kind ;

it was this which puzzled him—his inner being seemed to have been thrown off its balance. Everything was past, like a dream that has been told, and he was only conscious now of a confused tingling of pain, like that which is felt physically when a limb which has been numbed for a time, awakens to sensation.

At that time, Esther—present and living—seemed more to him than the memory of his wife. At first he had tried to steel himself against her; then he had found that indifference was impossible, and he had kept looking at the girl, and thinking to himself what a joy it would be to him, had he now a daughter like her to comfort his solitary old age. He felt very lonely, and in spite of his schemes of general utility, his life lacked individual interest.

He was almost angry with himself for being attracted towards Esther. Why should he feel any affection for the child of his enemy? Why should he wish to adopt her? It would be more natural to take up a waif from the streets. Would she not always be a reminder to him of past pain? Would it not be more for the good of humanity that his fund of benevolence should diffuse itself in more widespread channels? Might he not again be in danger of pinning his happiness upon a woman? Yet while he reasoned to himself in this way, he

found himself almost hoping that Sir Emilius Isherwood's answer might be unfavourable, and that he might after all be allowed to charge himself with Esther's future. It would almost clearly be his duty to do so, should her father's relatives disown her.

He began planning how he would educate her, and develop her faculties so that they might all tend towards the formation of a perfect character, and he went on speculating upon her disposition and intellectual bent. She was in many respects quite unlike her mother; already he saw that. Her nature was more contemplative, less passionate. There was the same disinterestedness, but not the same capacity of self-abandonment.

Then he thought of George, and quickly made his mind easy upon that score. Esther might be unhappy for a time, while her romantic conception of him lasted, but it would grow dim with time and absence. Their natures were clearly so incapable of assimilation that she would gradually drift away from him even in thought, and her childish love dream would relax any real hold upon her that it might now have.

It was late in the evening when they reached Bully Wallah, and after he had bidden the Overstones good-night and had gone to his own

room, Lydyiard trimmed the little kerosene lamp, shading it from the wind which blew in through the open window, and seating himself upon the side of his bed, drew out the packet of letters from his pocket. His hand trembled with excitement as he opened out the sheets, and an indescribable feeling of awe seemed to creep over him, as the fancy struck him that those two ghosts—that of his dead wife, and of the suicide Hagart might be in the room with him witnessing this violation of their mutual confidences. This dimly realised consciousness of a half-revealed PRESENCE comes often as forcibly to the mind of an atheist as to that of a believer in a spiritual world. Lydyiard paused a moment and asked himself whether it were not a breach of honour to read those letters, but the longing was so intense upon him that all such scruples vanished before the greatness of the temptation. “Who is so interested, or so safe as I am?” he said, half aloud, and then laid out the yellowed sheets one by one, taking them in the order of their dates.

As both Mr. Lydyiard had feared, and Mr. Overstone had vaguely suspected, the letters gave various clues to the past of Hagart and his so-called wife—a past totally unknown to Esther. It became clear upon their perusal that, not long

after the beginning of his connection with the mother of Esther, Robert Isherwood had forged the name of a friend and had been transported for the offence. Some of the letters had been addressed to him during the term of penal servitude when Esther's mother, bearing her then unborn babe, had followed him to Australia, and was earning her living as a workwoman in Perth. Some again had been written after the expiration of his sentence, before his removal to another colony, and his appointment at Mundoolan Island, and others from the island itself during the pilot's temporary absences at Frazer-ville.

The letters were the production of an educated and extremely emotional woman, whose impetuous nature had fretted against legitimate restraint, and had yet found a perverse satisfaction in sacrificing itself at the command of passion.

It was curious and melancholy to note the various phases through which the undisciplined yearning spirit had passed. First, the mistaken but enthusiastic determination to live nobly by another moral code than that sanctioned by society ; the evident but scarcely acknowledged disappointment ; the stand against mistrust, so pathetic in its resolution not to admit conviction ;

the struggle against belief in moral degradation ; the clinging to hope and softening of the fierce nature under the influence of maternity ; finally, the resignation of a crushed spirit which still held despairingly to the remnant of duty left as its support. Through all, there seemed no impulse to break the chain voluntarily assumed. It was in keeping with the character, that once having renounced a moral bond imposed by law and religion, it should bend, even to breaking, beneath a far harder yoke deliberately incurred.

Of the letters, and there were twelve, it seemed expedient to give only two to Esther. In the first, the writer described her child, its babyish beauty and pretty ways, and dwelt upon the absorption of her own sorrows into the fresh life of the little one.

Lydyiard brushed his eyes with his hand, and groaned as he read twice over, the pathetic sentences.

"If *our* child had lived," he murmured to himself, "she would never have left me."

". . . . My baby seems to have changed my nature, and I do not fret as I used against the bars which narrow my life, and make it seem all the harder because I can see the possible joy beyond. We women who have once scorned

motherhood, recognise in it when we taste its fulness, our sweetest destiny. When I tremble at the delicacy of my little one, I comfort myself with the thought that a child in heaven brings God nearer to a mother upon earth."

There was a paragraph in the second letter over which Lydyiard hesitated, but which, he reflected, would carry none but the superficial meaning to Esther. It ran thus:—

". . . . Do not torture yourself with the fear that your evil habits will drive me to leave you. You have no claim upon me or upon the child which I might not readily throw off, and you cannot compel me to live with you. But there is a more binding yoke than that which law imposes. I know now, though I did not always think so, that the obligations which we have incurred in the past, are chains forged whether we will or no, to bind the future. We cannot escape from them ; they hang upon us, and make life a burden and a misery. When one forsakes the standard of duty, there seems nothing left. *You* are my duty, and I must cling to you, though you are killing me. It would have been better for me if I had been true. Wrong-doing brings its punishment, and remorse kills the sweetness of life. It is better to be true at the cost of suffering, than to be false to a vow

that one has taken upon one's-self. If I live to see Esther grown-up, I will teach her so that fidelity may be the ruling principle of her life. I will teach her to renounce everything that seems sweeter than duty. The sweetness cannot remain. There must always be a curse with it, and the curse clings till death. . . ."

Lydyiard did not give the letters to Esther till just before his departure from the island. Then, as he was bidding her good-bye, he placed them in her hand.

"Esther," he said, "these were found among your father's papers. They may be a comfort to you; and if the time should ever come when you are inclined to judge your mother harshly, read them again, and you will realise what she suffered."

Esther looked at him with blank surprise.

"My mother!" she repeated, wondering within herself how it would ever be possible for her to judge harshly of the presiding saint of her girlhood.

"I mean," said Lydyiard, "that no child can comprehend the inner life of its parents, and you may be glad by and by to have those letters."

He took her hand, and looked down upon her face with a curious mixture of tenderness and

self-repression in his own. They were standing in the garden, and the child Bessie was clinging to Esther's knees, while overhead the sun streamed through the interlacing orange boughs, and shone upon Esther's head and upon the golden locks of little Bessie.

"I am going to leave you, Esther," said Lydyiard. "I am sorry to go away, though I am glad to think that you are settled here among people who will treat you kindly. You may think the Overstones practical, and somewhat rough, but they mean well towards you, and you must not think of leaving them till, as may happen six months hence, your future is decided for you. Trust in that future, Esther, and do not dwell upon the past. Give yourself to active employment. It is best for you now."

She looked at him wistfully, as though she would take comfort from his words.

"I know of whom you are thinking," he said hurriedly; "you are thinking of George; but try to bear in mind that a man is not like a woman—he forgets more easily. Esther," he added, prompted by an impulse to ascertain her feelings, should he decide upon adopting her; "it is possible that you and I may be brought into more intimate connection with each other. Should you dislike its being so?"

"I don't think that I understand, sir," said Esther, bewildered by his words.

"If we were to live together," said Lydyiard. "If I were your guardian—would that be unpleasant to you?"

Esther's face brightened as though a gleam of sunshine had flashed across it.

"Oh, no, no!" she exclaimed.

"It is only an idea," said Lydyiard, alarmed lest he had said too much. "Don't think of it, or attach any weight to my words. I am going back to England, and when the time comes, Mr. Overstone will tell you what you ought to do. Good-bye, Esther."

He kissed her forehead, and was turning away, when little Bessie cried—"Oo naughty man to go away—me want to kiss oo too."

Lydyiard took the child in his arms and kissed her with tenderness. Then he went into the yard, where a black boy was holding his horse, with the valise strapped on to the saddle. Esther watched him over the low garden fence, riding away in the direction of the pilot station, and felt utterly desolate and sick at heart.

The future, with its vague possibilities and family secrets, was hidden from Esther. She had no knowledge of what might befall her, to sustain her under her sorrow; and the present, with its

round of homely duties, seemed all the more distasteful after her late glimpse of Paradise. Had not her mind been so entirely filled with thoughts of George Brand, she would have pondered over Mr. Lydyiard's parting words and would have speculated upon what Fate had in store for her. As it was, she was too pre-occupied to observe that after the first four months following her father's death, both Mr. and Mrs. Overstone looked eagerly for the English mail, and whispered together as though they had a secret in common. But as each one came in bringing no letter from George, she settled down to a despairing endurance of her desolation till the next post arrived with its freight of hope and disappointment.

She was considerably surprised when, one morning, Mr. Overstone came to her with an English letter in his hand, and informed her that he had received instructions from her uncle to send her as soon as possible to England.

"My uncle!" exclaimed Esther, in blank astonishment. "I have no uncle."

"Yes, you have, my dear, and I have known it ever since your father died; but you weren't to be told anything about it till the Baronet had made up his mind whether he would acknowledge you or not. There's the letter, you

may read it presently. I'm afraid your father was a bad lot, but that's not a thing for me to concern myself with. You're a lucky gell Esther—niece to a real baronet, and he has come down very handsome with a cheque for your passage to England."

"Am I to go to England?" cried Esther. "Oh! do you mean that I am to go to England?" Already her imagination had spanned the sea which separated her from George, and she had no thought for her unknown relative or his disposition towards her.

"Now that's a thing," said Mr. Overstone. "that does not happen to every young woman, and I'm pleased to see that you are grateful for your good fortune. I've heard from Mr. Lydyiard too, and his colony is to be settled the end of this year. I'm thinking of taking the missus down to Brisbane for a trip, and I'll talk the whole thing over with Cleaver. He has a sound head, has Cleaver, though we aren't one upon all points. I want to get up my views about coal, for I'm certain there's a fortune to be made that way out of Bully Wallah, if one only knew how to set about it. And now that's a thing," continued Mr. Overstone, spluttering in his excitement, "I was reading the other day that charcoal would bring back the flavour of salt when

it had left it—and though, as the missus says, it is flying in the face of the Bible, which says that once salt has lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted? I'm not a man to pin my views even upon the New Testament itself—and ef there's any truth in the discovery, I'll work it out and prove it in the House before I've done with it."

CHAPTER XII.

ESTHER ARRIVES IN LONDON.

It was a dull October morning, and the *Lass of Gowrie* steamship, from Brisbane to London direct, had just anchored in the docks. Among her passengers was Esther Hagart, or Isherwood as she was now called, who, in obedience to her uncle's summons, had travelled from Australia to England, and who, in a state of excited expectancy just merging into disappointment, was standing upon the deck.

Sir Emilius Isherwood had behaved liberally, far more so, in the opinion of most people, than could have been expected. It was impossible to say whether dormant fraternal feeling, or a sense of justice had actuated him ; but at any rate, as has been seen, he had recognised Esther's claim upon him, and had responded to her dead father's appeal by a cheque for her passage money, and

an intimation that she was to be sent to school in England at his expense.

Further than this he did not explain his intentions; and as though shrinking from a painful subject, he had asked no questions as to Hagar's antecedent history, or particulars of Esther's mother. He appeared to have accepted his niece's existence as an unpleasant fact, to be dealt with in the least annoying manner possible; and in the letter which Mr. Overstone gave Esther to read made only a slight allusion to "an unpleasant affair," which had banished his brother from England. Therefore, though there was a strong impression of disgrace as connected with the story of Robert Isherwood in the minds of both Esther and Mr. Overstone, there was no actual evidence to confirm it.

Soon after the receipt of Sir Emilius Isherwood's instructions, Mr. and Mrs. Overstone had taken Esther to Brisbane, had spent a portion of Mr. Lydyiard's hundred pounds upon an outfit of questionable taste, and had finally placed her on board the *Lass of Gowrie*, in temporary charge of the captain. Mr. Overstone also wrote to Lydyiard and acquainted him with the tenor of Sir Emilius's letter.

To Esther the thought of her changed prospects was sweet. She was going to that earthly

paradise of which she had dreamed ; and surely her transition to England could not fail to bring her nearer to Brand. This was the point to which all her hopes of the future tended. She had received but one short letter from him shortly before leaving the island. It had been bald and unsatisfactory, giving her no definite information as to his movements, abounding in vague protestations and endearments, and winding up with the following doubtful sentence, " Don't set your heart upon hearing from me too often, darling. I'm afraid that I am an awfully bad fellow in some ways ; you must not make me out to be a hero, and I'm a horrid bad hand at letter-writing, but, whatever happens, I am your devoted GEORGE."

These words gave Esther some pangs of disappointed affection, but then, woman-like, she reflected that perhaps it was George's modesty which caused him to depreciate himself, and he had warned her that he was a bad correspondent. Her inexperience made her uncertain as to what was expected of them in their relative positions. She did not know how often she might reasonably hope to hear from him, or indeed whether she herself ought to write to him, and if so, in what terms her letters should be couched. Her natural modesty made her recoil from doing

anything which might seem unmaidenly, and she was utterly ignorant of the limits to which her reserve should extend. It must be remembered that she had not that experience in affairs of the heart which a boarding-school education usually imparts to young ladies.

She had written to him twice to the address of his bankers in Sydney, whence he had told her all communications would be forwarded to him. The first letter was sent shortly after her father's death; the second, just before her departure from Australia. To this latter she had of course received no reply, but she calculated that it would reach him just in time to enable him to meet her on board the *Lass of Gowrie*, and to bid her welcome to England.

She had been thinking of this meeting during the whole of her homeward voyage, trembling with shy delight at the thought of being again pressed in his arms, rehearsing her own timid avowals of happiness at their reunion, and picturing the rapturous joy with which he would greet her.

They would meet now, she thought, upon different ground. Though in her humility she could in no way think of herself but as his inferior, and adore him for having stooped to love her, there was comfort in the reflection that it was no

longer a case of King Cophetua and the beggar maid. She was as well-born as himself; and as for her educational deficiencies, they were certainly grave; but he had said he did not care about his wife being very talented, and she hoped by perseverance and application to place herself ere long upon a par with other English girls—perhaps not quite on the same level as the cousin of whom he had spoken to her, but as near it as he would consider necessary.

Poor Esther had the vaguest conception of her future life. All her ideas of English society had been gleaned from the very few books that had fallen in her way, and from George's conversation. Their paucity may therefore be imagined. She believed that it would be the exact antipodes of her previous existence. She had a dim notion that ladies and gentlemen talked in a superfine manner, in Grandisonian English, to the use of which she had never been able to attain; and that the former, after the completion of their education, wore trailing silk gowns and sat with their hands before them, or read all day. They were, in her imagination, far too exalted to condescend to household occupation, or to needlework, which it must be confessed Esther's own soul abhorred; and her inexperience was unable to gauge the importance

of any other employment for feminine brains or fingers.

Esther thought that she herself could never feel dull if she might only read, or wander about and dream. English scenery was in her mind a jumble of green fields, buttercups and daisies—of picturesque wintry landscapes, with a robin in the foreground, and a spire in the distance, such as she had seen on Christmas cards, or on the wrappers which had enfolded their tea and sugar from Frazerville. She could not settle satisfactorily what part she herself was to play against such a background, but she had all a girl's large faith in the capabilities of the future, and was too ignorant to be alarmed as to the figure she might cut in civilised society.

She began to feel very nervous when the steamer arrived at Greenwich, and she saw that some of the passenges went on shore there, or were met by their friends. Finding that no one had come for her, she was at first a little disappointed, then relieved at the respite granted her from the embarrassing introduction to her new relatives. She wondered whether they would all be standing in a row upon the wharf to receive her, as she had seen people stand in Brisbane when they expected friends by any of the steamers. All kinds of ridiculous possibilities

floated through her mind. She speculated as to whether she had an aunt or any girl cousins, and as to what she was to call Lady Isherwood and Sir Emilius.

She considered these difficulties during a wakeful night passed on the river, with strange noises all round her, and lights gleaming dimly through a thick mist, while the voices of boatmen and the noise of fog-horns disturbed the stillness. The problems were far from solution when, early the next morning, in the grey chill mist, the *Lass of Gowrie* was moored in the docks. Esther stood for some time against the bulwarks of the vessel, with fluttering heart and tightly clasped hands, beset by importunate cabmen and porters, till she was tired of shaking her head to the repeated questions, "Any luggage, miss?" "Want a cab, miss?" "Want to pass your boxes, miss?" that were shouted in her ear.

Her eyes vainly pierced the crowd, searching for a glimpse of Brand, whom she had fully expected to see waiting till the vessel should be moored before rushing on board and receiving her in his arms; but George was not there, or apparently any one else interested in her arrival.

One by one her fellow passengers were welcomed by eager friends, or walked calmly on shore by themselves. The crowd thickened, and

the din increased, but still Esther waited fruitlessly. Sir Emilius could not be there. Such a great personage, Esther thought, would surely have pushed his way on board before this; and George had not come to meet her, that was evident. Perhaps her letter had not reached him in time, though she had closely calculated when it would arrive in England. Perhaps he was abroad. The war of which they had talked, might have taken him away. He might be fighting now—killed, perhaps—

Esther shuddered at the thought, and cried in forlornness and desperation, while the people, hurrying to and fro intent upon their own business, brushed against her without begging her pardon. At last a sailor, touched by her tears, paused to say, “You had better go down to the saloon, miss, till some one comes for you; I suppose that you expect to be met. The deck is no place for ladies now.”

“Some one ought to meet me,” said poor Esther, looking gratefully at the sailor through her tears; “I don’t even know where I’m to go. I cannot think why there is no one here. I’m going to my uncle, Sir Emilius Isherwood, and I have never seen him or he me. Perhaps he has missed me through not knowing what I am like. Do you think it could have been so?”

“Bless you, no, miss. He’d have asked the steward for you by name, but he’ll be here before long, never fear. I dare say there has been some mistake about the time the vessel was expected in. The agents don’t know to an hour or so, and them gentlefolks makes a deal of bother about coming down here from the West End. I’ll be bound your uncle lives out Kensington way—the swells mostly do.”

“I don’t know where he lives,” said Esther, feeling it a comfort to talk to the man, who reminded her of Joe Bride; “but there is another gentleman who I thought might come to meet me. Do you know,” she added timidly, “whether there is a war now? He is a soldier, and I thought——”

“War!” repeated the sailor, “not as I knows on. They’re always talking of going to war with Russia, but I’ve heerd nothing of it from shore. Don’t take on, miss. Somebody is sure to come soon, and I’d go below if I were you. You’ll get knocked about among the ropes if you stop here.”

He was called off, but Esther did not go below as he had advised. She felt that it would be impossible for her to sit still, out of sight of land, and the confusion in the saloon was as great as that upon deck. She sat all the

morning mounting guard over her boxes, feeling every moment more forlorn, and becoming gradually fainter from hunger and despair. She had eaten nothing since the night before, and there was no possibility of getting any luncheon in the present disorganised state of the vessel. It was an unusually cold day for the time of year, and about three o'clock in the afternoon, a slow drizzle began to fall, and the fog crept up from the river. Esther could just see the dim outline of the houses on shore, and of the nearest church spires. Everything seemed dull and unlovely, a sort of dingy neutral grey. This was not the London she had pictured to herself. She had expected to see a city of palaces and brightness, with streets filled with gaily dressed ladies in carriages with champing horses, and with gentlemen who resembled George; but the low thoroughfares near the river were meaner in appearance than any colonial town. There was an air of squalor and dirt over everything, and the people she saw were rough, ill clad, and shivering. She could hear the distant roar of trains and traffic, but near at hand there was very little stir. The wharf was deserted except by sailors and navvies; the captain had hurried on shore long ago, and not one of her fellow passengers remained on board.

About four o'clock, when the day was darkening, and poor Esther, pacing the deck in desperate anxiety, was weeping helplessly from fatigue—a round dapper man in a black great coat and a shiny beaver hat, clambered up the plank which led to the *Lass of Gowrie*, and inquired of a sailor if “a young lady of the name of Isherwood” were on board.

Esther paused in her walk, and advanced timidly, wondering whether this sleek person was Sir Emilius. She was uncertain as to whether she ought to put out her hand, or to speak first, and then seeing that the stranger looked at her interrogatively, said in a frightened way :

“I am Esther. Are you my uncle, sir?”

A slight smile crossed the man's face, and he bowed profoundly. “*Not* Sir Emilius, miss—Sir Emilius's man.” Esther did not quite perceive the distinction, but he went on glibly, “My name is Parkins, miss. I have been—er—connected with the family for many years. Sir Emilius is attending an art sale at Christy and Manson's, and my lady is, I believe, engaged with social dooties. There is a cab outside the docks, miss, if you'll tell me where your luggage is. The family is quite well, and my lady is in London for a few days on her way back from

Brighton. I think that Sir Emilius intends proceeding to his country residence shortly."

Parkins, who was an estimable servant, and a person of refined feeling, delivered this address with the somewhat patronising air of one who wished to place a humble dependant of the family with which he had the honour of being connected at as great ease as was possible under the circumstances.

"This is my luggage," said Esther, pointing to the boxes at her feet.

"I beg your pardon, miss," said Parkins, with the well-bred surprise of a butler accustomed to Lady Isherwood's imperials. "Is this *all*?"

"I have not any more," said Esther, blushing painfully.

Parkins beckoned to a porter who had followed him on board, and made him shoulder the two small trunks. Then he politely took possession of Esther's umbrella, and of a dilapidated bandbox, which contained a bonnet of Mrs. Overstone's choice, and escorted his charge down the plank, and through the low range of store sheds, to the cab which was waiting outside the docks. He opened the door for Esther, and took his own seat upon the box.

It was a long drive from the docks, and the cab moved very slowly through the narrow dark

streets. When they reached the city proper, the turmoil of traffic increased, and they were obliged to pause among the string of carriages that came to a stand-still near the Mansion House. Esther began to realise in a bewildered way the vastness and life of this miniature world. Whence had come this crowd of bustling humanity, and what was it hurrying to see? How grim and black everything looked! The lumbering yellow omnibuses seemed vehicles of doom. The fog crept up closer and denser, and the line of houses seemed to close in before and behind, and to touch the murky sky, except where the illuminations of the gin palaces shone like jewels in the mist. All the lamps were not lighted, only one here and there, which seemed to be surrounded by a smoky halo.

St. Paul's loomed grand and gloomy. The clock struck the half hour as they passed the Cathedral; then all the chimes in the neighbourhood took up the peal one after the other, till the most distant died away in the din of the city.

There was a roar above, behind, and before. As the cab passed beneath Ludgate Hill Viaduct, a train went crashing overhead, and the poor little savage, accustomed to the desert solitudes of Mundoolan Island, could not repress a shriek of excited terror.

They drove down the Strand, and past Charing Cross, and by the lamplight Esther could see the lions in Trafalgar Square, and the fountains plashing near them. Then the cab turned into quieter regions. Pedestrians became less numerous, and broughams with high-stepping horses, and sleek footmen, and well dressed ladies dimly visible within, hurried by.

The houses now looked loftier and more uniform and decorous. The yellow leaves from the trees in the squares fluttered down upon the street. Barrel organs ground mercilessly forth the popular airs, which were all unfamiliar to the ears of our little barbarian, and a gipsy woman sang "Ah ché la morte" in a cracked voice, beneath one of the tall houses in a quiet street; Esther noticed that a servant in livery came to the door and chucked her a penny, bidding her contemptuously "be off." And then the cab turned into Berkeley Square, and stopped before a large mansion, with broad steps and a portico, decorated with the remnants of last season's flower garden. Parkins got down, and rang the bell with an air of proprietorship, and a footman in plush threw open the door and helped Esther to alight.

Presently she found herself standing in a softly carpeted hall, hung with pictures and china, and decorated with sculpture, and with a wide stair-

case at one end. Poor Esther stood clutching her umbrella and staring with bewildered eyes at all this grandeur. The shabbiness of her draggled black frock, battered hat, and cotton gloves, seemed borne in upon her with startling and awful conviction. She looked wistfully from one side to the other, only to meet the inquisitive gaze of two stolid flunkies. Her lips drooped beseechingly, and she trembled like a frightened child who scarcely dares to cry.

"Has Sir Emilius returned?" asked Parkins.

"No, sir," replied the footman.

"And her ladyship?"

"Her ladyship is out driving."

"Let Mrs. Cullen know," said Parkins, "that Miss Isherwood has arrived. Will you come this way, miss?" He conducted Esther through the hall and into a back room which looked cosy and luxurious. It was lined almost with books, and furnished with couches and chairs in deep crimson velvet. There were a great many quaint china vases upon the oak bookshelves, and some rare old prints in the spaces above, and plates hung over the doors. The windows were draped with heavy curtains, and between them was a massive escritoire, with old fashioned silver writing equipments. A fire burned in the grate, and here and there in the corners and recesses, a bit of

china or glass caught its glow, and shone like a jewel out of the mistiness. But everything was different to all that Esther had ever seen. Even the fire burned in another manner than its kindred element in Australia ; for instead of the dancing wood flames to which she had been accustomed, she saw only a bed of warm red coals. The softness and warmth were grateful indeed to the chilled, frightened creature. She was not clad with regard to the exigencies of an English autumn, and her frame, nurtured beneath tropical suns, could ill bear the northern chill. The sight of the fire, and of an old-fashioned silver tea-service sparkling upon a Sutherland table before it, awakened several dormant sensations. She had eaten nothing all day, and was hungry, cold, and faint. Had she dared, she would have sunk down upon the Persian hearth-rug and would have wept unrestrainedly. There seemed a choking ball in her throat, and a numbed feeling in her limbs. But the velvet portière stirred, and a smartly-capped elderly female dressed in black appeared, and looked at Esther curiously, but not unkindly.

“I’m Cullen,” she said, “Lady Isherwood’s maid and housekeeper ; I’m afraid that you are very cold, miss. My lady will be in from her drive presently. Shall I make you some tea ?”

Esther's tongue was tied, but Cullen did not wait for an answer ; she stirred the fire, poured out a fragrant cup of tea, and handed the girl some bread and butter. "You'd best take off your gloves, miss," she said, looking as a lady's maid would look, at those ill-fitting articles, and then down at Esther's gown. "You've travelled a long way haven't you ? from Australia, isn't it, miss ?" and she asked several patronising questions, which received but monosyllabic replies from Esther's pallid lips, and at last took her departure, leaving the weary girl in solitary possession of the room.

Warmed by the tea, Esther now felt, physically speaking, more comfortable. As soon as the portière had fallen behind Cullen's retreating figure, she sat down upon the hearthrug, took off her hat, and stretched out her numbed fingers to the heat. Then a soft footstool seemed to invite the pressure of her head ; she was not used to conventional ways, she was very tired, and no one seemed likely to enter. She lay down before the fire with the instinct of an animal in search of warmth, and looked up with wide open bewildered eyes to the ceiling and the mantelpiece above her. There was a bust of Clytie upon a marble pedestal near her head, and the face seemed to look down upon her with

a pure, pitying tenderness that reminded her of her mother, and was comforting to her loneliness.

Gradually her eyelids drooped. The velvet drapery of the mantelpiece seemed to sway and shake, till at last everything became indistinct. Clytie's face was more than ever like that of an angel, and the fire made a soft murmuring. A dreamy languor crept over her frame. The little brown fingers dropped nervelessly, the sharp lines of fatigue in her face softened, the long lashes swept her rounded cheek, and in a few moments she was sleeping like a tired child.

CHAPTER XIII.

A PLUNGE INTO CIVILISATION.

WHEN, half dreaming, half dozing, Esther became sensible to light and sound, a moderator lamp with a rose-coloured shade shed a soft glow over the apartment, and a lady was speaking in a high-pitched, unsympathetic treble, which buzzed without any meaning, in Esther's ears.

"You know, Emilius, I said from the first the whole thing was ridiculous. What was the use of bringing the girl here to be taught? The lower orders don't want education, I'm sure that I have heard very clever people say it was a great mistake raising them above their level. Do you hear, Emilius?"

"My dear?" questioned a thin little voice.

"The lower classes ought not to be educated," shouted the lady, still louder. "You get deafer every day, Emilius. There *must* be poor people,

and it only spoils them for servants if their heads are stuffed with notions."

"Notions—or superficial knowledge are harmful, my dear," Sir Emilius spoke in an expostulatory manner; "but it has always been my wish that the influence of art should be shed upon the multitude. What can be the effect of art but to refine and elevate?"

"Do you mean her to learn painting, then?" asked Lady Isherwood; "I should not mind that so much, if she had a good idea of colouring. Art is very well when it makes people useful. I shall never forget what a comfort that little painter you picked up in Rome, was to me. Léonie's gowns are nothing in point of taste to the costumes he designed. Now if the girl could be turned into an artistic dressmaker—Cullen is no use at all, and then she is getting old."

"My dear Hermione," said Sir Emilius, rousing himself, "you are quite mistaken in thinking that you can turn my brother's daughter into a dressmaker. It is very awkward; I wish I knew what to do with her. Poor Robert! He was my only brother, and I don't think there was ever a handsomer fellow, but always getting into scrapes—always in debt. Still I couldn't refuse to befriend his only child, and a girl is not like

a boy. Poor Robert! He was very fond of art."

"Don't mention your brother, Emilius," said Lady Isherwood; "I don't want to know anything more about him than that he was a disgrace to the name. I might be asked questions, and one's always safe in saying that one doesn't know. A *mauvais sujet* in a family is very awkward."

"I wonder who her mother was," said Sir Emilius, reflectively. "Robert told me nothing about her. I thought it best not to inquire. Some one he married out there perhaps. There was a story—but—that would be impossible."

"A wild woman most likely," exclaimed Lady Isherwood, who when she was annoyed spoke incisively, and when she was merely vaguely interested, in a rapid monotone. "Look there," she added, pointing contemptuously to Esther upon the hearthrug.

"It is a picturesque pose," said Sir Emilius, adjusting his eyeglass critically; "and she is like her father."

"A picturesque savage!" cried Lady Isherwood. "See how she is dressed! Look at her gown—alpaca that a kitchenmaid would be ashamed to wear—and her hat! What must the servants have thought when she arrived?"

It was very foolish of you to have anything to do with her. You might have sent some money to those farmer people, and she would have married out there, and we should have heard no more of her."

"You won't be troubled with her at present, my dear. I have arranged that she shall go to Miss Binney's school immediately. From all that I can gather, she is quite uneducated."

"Well, I am glad that we are to get rid of her," said Lady Isherwood. "It would be very awkward taking her to Bar Wold, and the house full of Charles's friends for the pheasant shooting. I have had a letter from Adelaide to-day, Emilius. She says she can't leave her sister yet. It is too inconsiderate of her. I am sure that some people think nothing of having a baby. I want Adelaide particularly," continued Lady Isherwood, her thoughts wandering away from Esther, who still lay upon the hearthrug, conscious of the conversational buzzing, but not sufficiently wide awake to take in its meaning. "She has very good taste, and there are my dresses to be decided upon for the winter balls and the shooting parties. If you don't get new gowns for the country, people say that you are wearing out last season's things. To be sure, they could be altered; but Cullen never knows what becomes me, and

Léonie don't seem to care. I think I shall change Léonie, but a new dressmaker is such an anxiety, and since Floss died, and Charles began to go wrong, I haven't felt equal to worry."

This was Lady Isherwood's way of passing over the misdemeanours of her only son, a young gentleman who played loo for high stakes, and had an unfortunate weakness for racing.

Sir Emilius uttered a heavy sigh at the mention of his heir, and Lady Isherwood asked, "Have you heard what Charles did at Newmarket, Emilius?"

"I heard that he lost money," said Sir Emilius, "as usual—God knows what he is coming to." He sat silent for a minute or two, then deliberately rose and adjusted a group of old Chelsea upon a bracket near him. "That decided me against buying Bellingham's Sèvres clock at Christy's to-day. It was a great sacrifice—only four like it in the world, and it went for fifteen hundred guineas."

"I think that we have clocks enough at Bar Wold," said Lady Isherwood unsympathetically. She fidgeted with her bonnet strings, and with the bracelets upon her arms; and Sir Emilius, heaving another deep sigh, sank back

into the depths of his arm-chair. He seemed almost swallowed up in it, as Esther observed, for she was now sufficiently awakened, to examine the appearance of her relatives.

Her uncle was a small spare man, with a wrinkled face and a very large nose, and with a melancholy way of staring into vacancy. Lady Isherwood was florid and fat, with a still peach-like complexion, and a profusion of soft hair that had once been golden. She had blue eyes, spoiled by light lashes, and a pretty pouting mouth that often looked cross. She had been a beauty in her youth, and had been known as the lovely Miss Comyn ; but her relations always talked of her as "poor Hermione," and regretted that she was such a baby. They had much more reason to pity Sir Emilius, who was a well-informed man, and had once had some loftier aspirations in life, than the ambition to make his house into a museum for old china. But these had all dwindled into a milk-and-watery enthusiasm for art, and a mania for *bric-à-brac*. As for Lady Isherwood, the great interests of her life were bounded by Wörth and Léonie ; but she had also a way of delivering incisive platitudes with the tactless freedom of a spoiled child, and retained always a happy conviction of her own importance in the scale

of the universe, and of the infallibility of her judgments in general. Poor Esther became suddenly conscious that she had no right to lie any longer upon that soft rug in front of the fire, like a tired dog, and rose with a start, encountering in her wondering gaze round the room, the vapid glance of her new aunt.

Lady Isherwood stared at the girl with a kind of *naïve* curiosity, as though the new comer had been a wild animal secured at a convenient distance for her inspection. Then she gave her head a little nod, and appealed shrilly to her husband—

“Sir Emilius—do you see? the girl is awake.”

Sir Emilius roused himself from regretful thoughts of the Sèvres clock.

“I was told, my dear, that her name is Esther.”

“Well,” said Lady Isherwood, “‘Esther’ is awake.”

“Esther,” said Sir Emilius, rising slowly and holding out his hand, “I am glad to see that you have arrived safely from Australia. It is a very long voyage. How do you do? I hope that you are quite well.”

“I suppose that you have not slept much, lately,” said Lady Isherwood, “though I thought that was all people did on board ship—but did you not see that there were sofas and chairs in

the room? It is not good manners to fall asleep directly you arrive in a house—perhaps you did not know that; or you might have been pretending with your eyes shut, in order to hear what we said of you.”

Esther was too frightened and bewildered, to feel angry at the imputation.

“I wasn’t pretending,” she faltered; “I was cold—and I did not mean to fall asleep.”

“Are you glad to come to England?” asked Sir Emilius.

“I don’t know, sir,” answered Esther, inclined to cry; “everything seems so strange; but it is beautiful here.”

“You like the room,” said Sir Emilius, brightening up; “I took a great deal of pains with it, and that china is very valuable; it is real old Worcester. You have never seen anything like it before? You should try and cultivate a feeling for art by observing all these things—and pictures. I have some fine paintings at Bar Wold.”

“I hope that you are grateful for what we are going to do for you,” said Lady Isherwood, “and for what we have already done. It has been a great expense to us bringing you over from Australia, and now we are going to pay for your schooling. Perhaps by and by, when you have been taught something, you may be able to

read aloud to me, and that will be making yourself useful. I'm very fond of being read aloud to, while I am doing my crewel work. Do you see that table-cover? I worked it. The pattern was designed at the Art School of Needlework. Do you think it pretty?"

"I don't know, ma'am," said Esther, staring with a want of appreciation, at an æsthetic combination of blue and green.

"You should not say 'ma'am' to me. The servants say 'my lady,' but I am sure I don't know what it would be best for you to call me."

"Lady Isherwood is your aunt," explained Sir Emilius. "I understand, my dear, that you have been brought up in complete ignorance of your father's family?"

"Yes, sir," replied Esther.

"It was better so," said Sir Emilius; "it showed right feeling on Robert's part. Can you tell me anything about your mother? Do you know what her maiden name was?"

"I never heard anything about her," said Esther, flushing, as she always did, when her mother was mentioned.

"You don't know whether your father married her in Australia?"

"No, sir."

"Your father went out under painful circum-

stances," continued Sir Emilius ; " it is a subject to which we never make any allusion. His name had been almost forgotten when his letter came to me begging me to provide for you. It was a request that I could not conscientiously ignore ; though you must understand that I am in no way bound to support you, and what I may do for you in the future must depend entirely upon your own conduct. Do you understand, Esther ? "

" Yes, sir," said Esther again.

" I mean kindly to you, my dear," said Sir Emilius, touched by her meekness and her prettiness. " You are like your father, certainly like him, but the subject is painful, and the less you talk of him, and of your early life, the better. I am going to send you to school. Miss Binney is a very worthy lady, the sister of a tutor of my son's." Sir Emilius sighed again—Esther thought that he was always sighing—and his thin white hands rubbed each other nervously all the time he was speaking. His head was poked forward a little, and he talked in that soft monotone which is observable in deaf people ; but he was a very gentle old man she thought, and not at all alarming. " You must do your best to profit by her instructions, and to cultivate a perception of the beautiful."

"Have you a better gown than that?" asked Lady Isherwood suddenly.

"I have my Sunday frock," said Esther; "it is black, like this one."

"Cullen must take you to Jay's to-morrow. Do you hear Emilius—she can't go about like that."

"Very well, my dear."

"It is nearly dressing time. Is she to dine with us?"

"I suppose so, my dear," said Sir Emilius. "Where else should she dine?"

"She can't go to the housekeeper's room can she?" asked Lady Isherwood, doubtfully. "Well, you had better come up stairs with me," she added, rising and addressing Esther. "Cullen can show you your room."

Esther was taken up four flights, to the bedroom which had been prepared for her. It was only a moderately comfortable chamber near the top of the house, but it seemed to her that the utmost effort of civilisation could provide nothing more luxurious. A housemaid was turning over the contents of Esther's trunk, and asked in a supercilious manner, if she could assist Miss Isherwood, but the girl dismissed her; and then, divining by a happy instinct that she was expected to make some changes in her toilette,

washed her face and hands, brushed her hair, and put on her other black frock.

At the clang of a gong she ventured to descend the two flights of stairs, and was confronted by a footman on the landing and shown into the drawing-room.

Had Esther known anything about the matter, she would at once have realised, that Sir Emilius Isherwood's house was decorated after the most approved fashion of modern æstheticism. There were dados upon the walls, and subdued curtains, and sickly carpets, a great deal of china, panels painted in stiff mediæval patterns, and mirrors in quaint old-fashioned frames. It was all very beautiful and bewildering, but she was too frightened to observe details. She entered awkwardly. The distance between herself and the group round the fire, was terrible to think of traversing, and, confused by the soft lights, and multitudinous knicknacks, she knocked against a spindle-legged table in her progress, and upset a little china bowl upon it. The bowl was smashed into a hundred fragments, and the pot-pourri with which it had been filled, strewed the carpet.

Lady Isherwood turned sharply from the fireplace where she had been standing, looking, poor Esther thought, awful in her wrath, and in the dignity of her velvet dress.

"You must be taught better manners, miss, before you come to us again. I told you, Emilius, that she had better have gone to the house-keeper's room. Can't you look where you are going? That china is very valuable."

"It was oriental," said Sir Emilius, with tears in his voice, picking up two or three of the pieces and regarding them wistfully. "It can't even be riveted. Parkins, see that the most valuable of the china is removed to-morrow from these small tables. Never mind, my dear," he added, seeing that Esther's lip was quivering; "these things must happen, you know, sometimes, and I daresay that you cannot help being clumsy."

"Every one can help being clumsy," said Lady Isherwood, incisively.

Just then a gentleman ran up the stairs, and Parkins announced Mr. Bernard Comyn. "What is the matter?" asked the new comer, in a brisk mellow voice. "Have you broken some of your china, Sir Emilius? Well, if you will put it on Queen Anne tables in the centre of a dim room, I don't see what else you can expect. It's not high art, is it, to have a light that one can see by? That is one of the reasons why I'm afraid of coming here. I feel like a bull in a china shop. How do you do Hermione? Will you give me some dinner?"

"Bernard!" cried Lady Isherwood in a surprised voice; and Sir Emilius said in his feeble way—"Glad to see you Bernard. I did not know that you were in England."

"I have just come back from a walking tour in Switzerland."

"They all say that you ran away," said Lady Isherwood, in her usual tactless manner, "because you had not passed your examination."

"Oh!" said the young man flushing a little angrily. He was not so very youthful, but he looked fresh and energetic beside Sir Emilius's withered-up face and figure. He had a rather massive, clever face, with an overhanging brow, and a pair of contemplative eyes looking out from beneath horizontal brows. His upper lip was short and moved restlessly, and he had a way of lifting up his chin, which was rather long and suggested a great deal of activity. "*They* means the family, I suppose, Hermione? Well, the combined counsel of fools does not usually result in wisdom, and it is not to be wondered at, that they were out in their judgment. I did not run away."

"You are very rude," said Lady Isherwood, "and if it comes to being fools—you know you *didn't* pass. And I was very much surprised at

it, for you worked hard ; and people say that you are clever, Bernard."

"I made up my mind some time ago that I would not go in for the Bar," said Bernard shortly.

"But you must do something," said Sir Emilius. "And you are getting on in years."

"I don't see why I should do anything, in your sense of the word," answered Bernard testily: "I have a sufficient income to keep me from starving."

"It would be a good thing if you were to marry an heiress," said Lady Isherwood. "I know a very nice girl with——"

"Hermione," said Bernard not very good-temperedly, "pray don't trouble yourself about my matrimonial prospects. It is labour quite thrown away."

"Dinner is on the table," announced Parkins.

Sir Emilius offered his arm to his niece, and for the first time Bernard became aware of Esther's presence. He saw a little pale face surmounting a high, shabby, black frock, and eyes of unusual beauty, that watched with sympathetic understanding, the irritation provoked by Lady Isherwood's remarks.

"Why! who is that?" Esther heard him ask, as he followed with her aunt.

“It’s an Australian niece of Emilius’s,” replied Lady Isherwood. “She’s his brother’s daughter.”

“I never knew that he had a brother out there,” exclaimed Bernard.

“He’s dead,” replied Lady Isherwood. “He was a *mauvais sujet*, so don’t ask questions. I think it extremely inconsiderate of Emilius to have the girl here ; but he is always doing silly things. However, he has been punished for his folly already, for she is a perfect savage, and broke one of his oriental bowls just before you came in.”

Bernard said no more, but he looked at Esther a good deal during dinner. She was painfully awkward, and evidently bewildered. He noticed compassionately, her quick flushings and the quivering of her lips, and good-naturedly tried to draw attention from her embarrassment, by an amusing account of his Swiss expedition.

Esther was naturally refined, and therefore secure from any shocking solecism ; but good breeding does not come quite by instinct, and it must be remembered, that in Australia she had lived in the roughest fashion, and upon the most primitive fare, cooked for the most part by her own fingers. To go through the varied courses of a modern dinner *à la Russe*, waited upon by Parkins and his three satellites, was to her an

alarming experience. It was not surprising that she sat overpowered with confusion, and perplexed as to the relative use of the implements placed before her, or that in every gesture she betrayed a complete ignorance of the customs of society. When the servants had left the room, Lady Isherwood remarked with her unpleasant candour, "It is to be hoped that Miss Binney will teach you how to eat your dinner, before you come to us again. It would have been excessively awkward had any one but Bernard been here to see what a barbarian you are."

"Hermione," said Bernard, in a serious voice, but with an amused look in his eyes; "you know that I have travelled a great deal, and I have come to the conclusion that you English are, with your insular prejudices, the most thorough barbarians in the world. I once had the honour of dining with their majesties of the Fiji Islands, and I assure you, that they looked upon me as a far greater savage than themselves. The standard of etiquette as regards dining is entirely relative."

"I don't know anything about the king and queen of the Fiji Islands," said Lady Isherwood, looking puzzled; "but it is ridiculous to say that it is correct to eat one's jelly with a knife."

"You are drinking nothing, Bernard," said Sir Emilius. "Is not the claret to your liking?"

What do you say to a bottle of the Mouton of '58?"

"No, thank you," replied Bernard, filling his glass with water, "I have turned teetotaller."

"Why, Bernard!" exclaimed Lady Isherwood, "how very odd! You are full of fads about eating and drinking, and exercise. I thought that only common people were teetotallers. You used to say that wine stimulated the brain, but I suppose that you have found out your mistake."

She swept languidly out of the dining-room, and Esther followed her up stairs. The poor girl seated herself in a corner of the drawing-room, not daring to speak, or to touch one of the library books with which a low table near the fire was strewed. Lady Isherwood looked at them one by one, taking no notice of her niece, and finally settled herself in an arm-chair with the *Morning Post*, which she read, making occasional comments upon the fashionable news, but her remarks were all as so much Greek to Esther.

Presently the gentlemen entered, and coffee was brought in. Bernard fidgeted about the room, and pished at Hermione's books. He glanced at a review, and then carried his cup of coffee to a chair beside Esther, and began

talking to her. He asked her several questions about her voyage, and about Australia, talking in an abrupt, eager manner, as though everything that was out of the common interested him.

Lady Isherwood's scanty explanation of Esther's presence in the house had apparently satisfied Bernard, for he asked no awkward questions. He made a great many inquiries as to the life she had led and the mode of cattle farming in Australia, and when she described the island, looked at her with real interest, exclaiming at intervals, "How curious!—What a wild life!"—and so on, till Esther began to forget her shyness, and to talk quite naturally.

"Well," said Bernard, "I don't think it could have been such a bad sort of place; I think that I should have liked it, but I daresay it was lonely for a girl. You had very few books there, I suppose?"

"Scarcely any, sir," replied Esther.

"Then you haven't had much education. Sir Emilius says that you are going to school."

"I hope so, sir," replied Esther.

"You would like that?"

"Oh yes," cried Esther. "I am longing to learn."

Bernard nodded his head in an approving

way. "I like you for that. Now *I* am fond of learning everything I can. One can't get on in life without an interest of some sort, and when I go in for a thing I like to master it, unless I find something else that suits me better. I am not sure that it is not an advantage knowing next to nothing. You have the whole field before you without the confusion of a general smattering. If I were you, I should try to discover my line—it might be languages, or drawing, or music—and when you have discovered it, bring your powers into a focus, as it were. I am a great believer in people having a particular bent, and working towards it."

"Bernard," said Sir Emilius in his slow, gentle way, "that does not come well from you, who have gone in for so many things, and are now a mere *dilettante*."

"Dilettantism is a vocation in itself," said Bernard, reddening slightly. "To be a *dilettante* does not imply that one is a sciolist."

"A rolling stone," quoted Sir Emilius softly, shaking his head. "Advancing age brings the desire to settle down and to form a home."

"I have enough to live upon as a bachelor," said Bernard. "Two rooms with a cartload of furniture are the only diggings I care for. And as for marriage, at which Hermione is always

driving, a fashionable young woman with three ideas in her head would not suit me at all. I want an intellectual companion ; and if I don't come across a rational woman, who will consent to rough it with me on £800 a year, I'll give up all notion of matrimony."

"Eight hundred a year," repeated Lady Isherwood, reflectively ; "she could not keep a lady's maid upon that ; and how would she get her dresses made ?"

Bernard's chin went up impatiently. "Hermione always rubs me the wrong way," he said in a low tone to Esther ; "I can't stand being with her for long. I suppose you don't know much about the family politics," he added, taking up a paper and speaking from behind it. "I am no relation to Sir Emilius, therefore I can't claim connection with you. Hermione is my cousin, but I hope you won't consider me responsible for her unpleasantnesses. She was a beauty, and she is like the poor pretty princess to whom the fairies gave everything but wisdom ; she never grew mentally after she was fourteen, except in a knowledge of millinery. You must not take it to heart when she makes herself disagreeable ; she really does not mean it, and is like a grown-up baby—saying always exactly what she thinks. I could see that you were almost crying once or

twice this evening ; I dare say you felt strange and uncomfortable."

" Oh ! so strange, sir," said poor Esther.

" There," said Bernard, " you'll have Lady Isherwood hauling you over the coals again. Girls don't call gentlemen ' sir ' in England—I wish they were half so respectful. It is only in novels that plain governesses address their masters as ' sir,' and contrive to inspire them with a violent attachment. You would not like me to call you ' madam,' would you ? "

Esther laughed.

" I see that we shall be good friends," continued Bernard ; " you are not afraid of me, and you will not mind my telling you when you make mistakes. People in England don't eat jelly with their knives, though Hermione was a little puzzled about the etiquette of the Fiji Islands. Aren't you very tired ?—you look so pale. Are you always so pale ? "

" I am very tired," said Esther, " but I don't like to ask if I may go to bed."

" Hermione," exclaimed Bernard, jumping up, " may I ring for a candle ? It is thoughtless of you not to recollect that your niece has had a long voyage."

Parkins brought in the candle, and Bernard

handed it to Esther, bidding her good-night, with a hearty pressure of her fingers.

"I don't get up to breakfast," said Lady Isherwood; "Cullen will bring you yours; and you are going to a shop to-morrow, to have some clothes bought for you, before you go to school. Good-night."

She dismissed Esther with a little nod. Sir Emilius was asleep in his chair. The girl climbed up the stairs, and undressing herself, lay down upon the bed, which was shrouded in heavy moreen curtains, and made her feel as though she were in a prison. She was too excited to sleep. The various impressions of the day came crowding into her mind, and filled her brain with a medley of confused images. Of all the people she had seen that day, Bernard's face stood out most distinctly. How kind he had been! She thought of George, and came to the conclusion that English young men in general, were a race of Paladins who devoted themselves to the succour of those in distress.

Though her bed was more luxurious than any she had ever slept in, Esther lay awake nearly all night. When she tried to close her eyes and compose her thoughts, the distant roar of London sounded like the roll of the ocean as it beat against

the rocks upon a stormy night. There were unaccustomed cries in the street near her, which, however, destroyed that illusion, and just as she was going off, something curious and unexpected in the shape of a noise would awaken her again with a violent start.

END OF VOLUME I.

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